



THE BOOK OF PITY



AND OF DEATH

Pierre Loti

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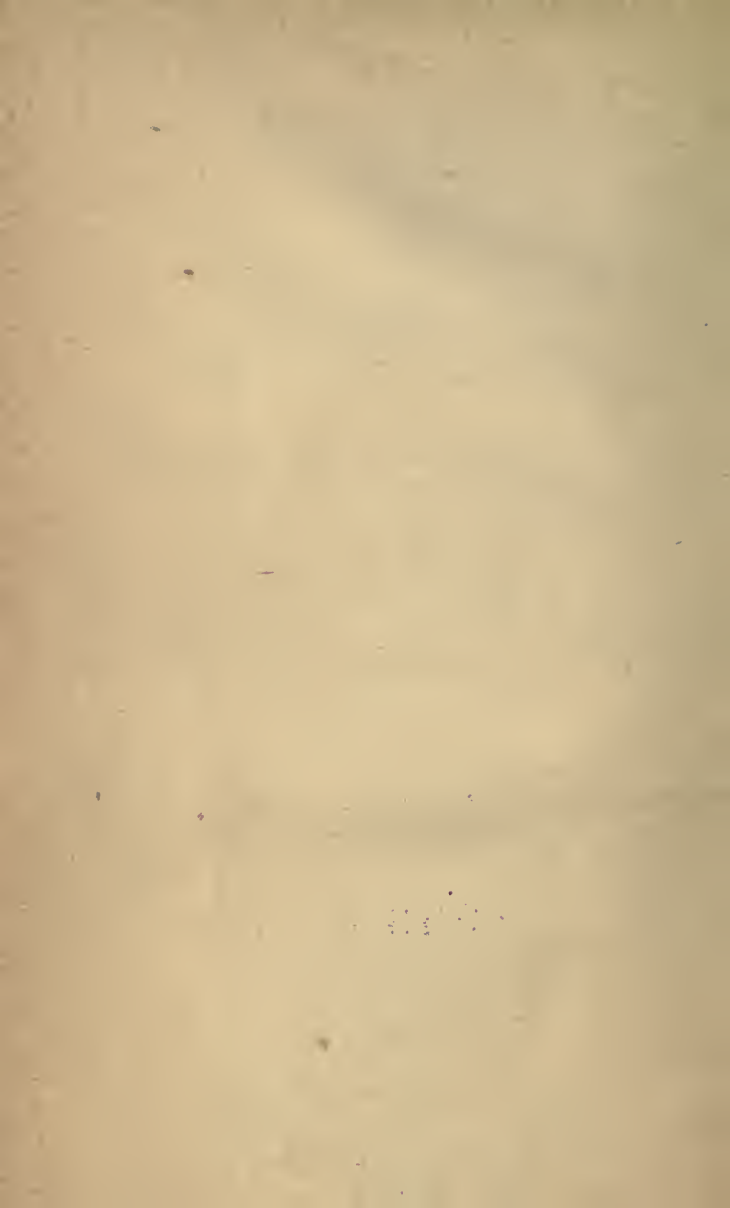








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# THE BOOK OF PITY AND OF DEATH

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BY

PIERRE LOTI

*(of the French Academy)*

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To My Beloved Mother

I DEDICATE THIS BOOK, AND WITHOUT FEAR;  
FOR HER CHRISTIAN FAITH ALLOWS  
HER TO READ WITH TRAN-  
QUILLITY EVEN THE  
MOST SOMBER  
THINGS.



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A PRELIMINARY WORD FROM  
THE AUTHOR.

*Ah ! Insensé, qui crois que tu n'es pas moi.*

—VICTOR HUGO : “ Les Contemplations.”

THIS book is more my real self than anything I have yet written. It contains one chapter (the Ninth, which is between page 185 and page 242) that I have never allowed to appear in any magazine lest it should fall under the eyes of certain people without my being able to give them a forewarning. My first inclination was not to publish this chapter at all. But I thought of the friends I have who are unknown to me ; one response from their distant sympathy I would regard as too much to give up. And then I have always the feeling that in time and space I extend a little the limits of my own soul by ming-

ling it with theirs. A few moments and I shall have passed away; and then, perhaps, these brethren will preserve the life of the images dear to me which I have graven on their memories.

This craving to struggle against death, besides—next to the desire of doing something of which one believes one's self capable—is the sole spiritual reason one has for writing at all.

Among those who profess to study the works of their neighbors, there is a goodly number with whom I have nothing in common, either in my language or my ideas. I am less than ever capable of feeling irritation against them, so much do I allow, before judging other men, for differences either natural or acquired.

But this is the first time their sarcasm has the power to wound me, if it should ever reach me, for it would wound at the same time things and beings that are sacred to me. I certainly give them their chance by publishing this book. To them,

then, I desire to say just here : " Do me the favor not to read it ; it contains nothing for you ; and it will bore you so much, if you only knew."

PIERRE LOTI.



A DREAM.



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## A DREAM.

I WOULD I knew a language apart in which I could write the visions of my sleep. When I try to do so with ordinary words I only succeed in constructing a description that is clumsy and dull, in which my readers can see nothing. I am alone able to perceive behind the cloud of accumulated words the unfathomable abyss.

Dreams, even those which seem to us the longest, have, it appears, a scarcely appreciable duration—no more than those fugitive moments in which the spirit floats between waking and sleep. But we are deceived by the extraordinary rapidity with which their mirages succeed and change; and having seen so many things pass before us we say: “I have dreamt the whole

night through," when perhaps we have dreamt for barely one minute.

The vision which I am about to describe did not really last in all probability for more than a few seconds, for even to myself it appeared very brief.

The first faint picture defined itself two or three times by stages like the flame of a lamp that is raised by slight jerks behind something transparent.

At first there was a long, wavering light, drawing to it the attention of my soul as it emerged from deep sleep, from night, and from non-existence.

The light becomes a beam of the sun, which enters by an open window and spreads over the floor. At the same time, my soul growing more excited, suddenly is disquieted; a vague reminiscence of I know not what, a rapid presentiment, rushes upon me like a flash of lightning, of something which must move me to the very depths of my soul.



Then the scene becomes more defined. It is the ray of the evening sun that comes from a garden into which the window looks—an exotic garden where, without seeing them, I know there are mango trees. In the sunlight that lies across the floor is reflected the shadow of a plant which is in the garden outside and trembles gently—the shadow of a banana tree.

And now the parts, which were comparatively dark, become clear; in the semi-light the different objects become distinct, and at last I see everything with an indescribable shudder.

Yet there is nothing there but the most simple things: a small colonial room, with walls of wood and chairs of straw: on a console table a clock of the time of Louis the Fifteenth, whose pendulum ticks imperceptibly. But I have already seen all this, though I am conscious of being unable to recollect where, and I am shaken with anguish before this dark veil which is spread

across at a certain point in my memory, impeding the looks I would plunge beyond into some abyss more profound.

It is evening, and the golden light is about to disappear, and the hands of the Louis Fifteenth clock point to six—six o'clock, on what day forever lost in the eternal gulf? on what day, in what year, now remote and dead?

Those chairs have also an antique look. On one of them is laid a woman's large hat, white straw, and of a shape which was in vogue more than a hundred years ago. My eyes are at once attracted to it, and then again the indescribable shudder, stronger now than before. The light becomes lower and lower, and now it is scarcely even the dim illumination of ordinary dreams. I do not know, I cannot say how it is, and yet I feel that at one time I was familiar with everything in this house and with the life that was led there—this life, more melancholy and more remote in the Colonies of former days, when the dis-

tances were greater, and the seas more unknown.

And while I gaze at this woman's hat, which gradually becomes dimmer and dimmer, like everything else which is there in the gray twilight, the reflection comes to me, though evidently it sprung in another brain than mine, "Oh, then *She* has come in."

And, in fact, *She* does appear. *She* stands behind me without my having heard her enter—*She* remains in that dark space in the room to which the reflection of the sun does not penetrate; *She*—very vague, like a sketch, drawn in dead colors and gray shadows.

*She*—very young, a Creole, bare-headed, her black curls arranged around her brow in a manner long since out of date: eyes, beautiful and limpid, that seemingly long to speak to me, with a mixture in them of sad apprehension and infantine candor: perhaps not absolutely beautiful, still supremely charming . . . and then, above

all things, it is *She*—a word which in itself is exquisitely sweet to pronounce, a word which, taken in the sense in which I understand it, embraces in it every reason for existence, expresses almost the ineffable and the infinite. To say that I recognized her would be an expression miserably commonplace and miserably weak. There was something which made all my being rush toward her, moved by some profound and irresistible attraction, as if to seize hold of her, and this impulse at the same time had something about it restrained and repressed, as though it were an impossible effort by someone to regain his lost breath and his dead life after years and years passed under the mound of a grave.

. . . . .

Usually a very strong emotion in a dream breaks its impalpable threads and all is over. You awake; the fragile web, once broken, floats an instant, and then vanishes the more quickly the more eagerly

the mind strives to retain it; disappears like a torn veil which one pursues into the void, and which the wind carries away to inaccessible distances.

But no; this time I woke not, and the dream continued even while it was being effaced, lasted on still while gradually fading away.

A moment we remained one opposite the other, stupefied, in the very ecstasy of our remembrance, by some indefinable and somber inertia; without voices to speak, and almost without thought; exchanging our phantom looks with astonishment and a delicious anguish. . . . Then our eyes were veiled and we became forms still vaguer, performing insignificant and involuntary actions. The light became dimmer, ever dimmer, and soon we saw almost nothing. She went outside and I followed her into a kind of drawing-room with white walls, vast and scantily furnished with simple things, as was the custom in the dwellings of the planters.

Another woman's shadow awaited us there, clothed in the Creole dress—an elderly woman whom I recognized almost immediately, and who resembled her, doubtless her mother. She arose at our approach, and we all three went out together, without previous arrangement, as if obeying a habit. . . . Good Heavens! What an accumulation of words and of prolix phrases to explain awkwardly all that thus passed—passed without duration and without noise, between personages transparent as rays, moving without life in a darkness that ever increased, ever became more colorless, and ever dimmer than that of night.

We all three went out together in the twilight into a sad little street, ah! so sad—with small, low colonial houses on each side under large trees; at the end, the sea, vaguely defined; over it all, a suggestion of expatriation, of distant exile, something like what one would have felt in the last century in the streets of Martinique or of

La Réunion, but without the full light of day; everything seen in that twilight where dwell the dead. Large birds wheeled in the dark sky, but, in spite of this darkness, one had the consciousness of its being that hour, still bright, which follows the setting of the sun. Evidently we were following an ordinary habit. In this darkness, which ever became thicker, though it was not the darkness of night, we were once again taking our evening stroll.

But the clear impressions were no longer visible, and there remained to me nothing beyond a notion of two specters, light and sweet, that walked by my side, and then, then came nothingness to us, extinguished in the absolute night of real sleep.

I slept for a long time after this dream—an hour, two hours, how long I know not. When I awoke and began to think, as soon as the first recollection of what I had seen came back to me, I experienced



that kind of internal emotion which makes one start and open wide one's eyes. In my memory I caught the vision first at its most intense moment, that in which suddenly I had thought of *Her*; that I recognized *her* large hat thrown on that chair, and that *she* had appeared from behind me. . . . Then slowly, little by little, I recollected all the rest: details, so precise, of that room already familiar to me; of that older lady whom I saw in the shade; of that walk in the little dilapidated street. . . . Where, then, had I seen and lived all this? I sought rapidly in my past with a certain inquietude, with an anxious sadness, *believing it certain that I should find it all there.* But no; there was nothing of the kind anywhere in my own life; there was nothing to resemble it in my own experiences. . . .

The human head is filled with innumerable memories, heaped up pell-mell, like the threads in a tangled skein. There are thousands and thousands of them hidden



in obscure corners whence they will never come forth; the mysterious hand that moves and then puts them back seizes sometimes those which are most minute and most illusive, and brings them back for a moment into the light during those intervals of calm that precede or follow sleep. That which I have just related will certainly never reappear; or, if it does reappear some other night, I shall probably learn no more as to this woman and this place of exile, because in my head there is no more that concerns them. It is the last fragment of a broken thread which finished where finished my dream. The commencement and the end existed in other brains long since returned to dust.

Among my ancestors I had some sailors whose lives and adventures are but imperfectly known to me, and there are certainly—I know not where—in some small cemetery in the Colonies some old bones which are the remains of the young woman with the straw hat and the black

locks. The charm which her eyes exercised over one of my ancestors was sufficiently powerful to project a last mysterious reflection even unto me. I dreamt of her the whole day . . . . and with so strange a melancholy.

THE SORROW OF AN OLD  
CONVICT.



## THE SORROW OF AN OLD CONVICT.

THIS is a little story which was told me by Yves. It happened one evening when he had gone into the Roads to carry in his gunboat a cargo of convicts to the transport vessel which was to take them to New Caledonia.

Among them was a very old convict (seventy at least), who carried with him very tenderly a poor sparrow in a small cage.

Yves, to pass the time, had entered into conversation with this old fellow, who had not, it appears, a bad face, but who was tied by his chain to a young gentleman—ignoble-looking, sneering, with the glasses of the short-sighted on a small pale nose.

An old highwayman arrested for the

fifth or sixth time for vagabondage and robbery, he said he was. "How can a man avoid stealing when he has once commenced, and when he has no trade whatever, and when people won't have anything to do with him anywhere? He must, mustn't he? My last sentence was for a sack of potatoes which I took in a field with a wagoner's whip and a pumpkin. Mightn't they have allowed me to die in France, I ask you, instead of sending me down there, old as I am?". . . . And then, quite happy at finding that somebody was willing to listen to him with sympathy, he showed to Yves his most precious possession in the world, the little cage and the sparrow.

The sparrow was quite tame, and knew his voice, and for more than a year had lived with him in his cell, perched on his shoulder. . . . Ah, it was not without trouble he had obtained permission to take it with him to New Caledonia, and then, he had besides to make for it a cage which

would be suitable for the voyage, to procure some wood, a little old wire, and a little green paint to paint the whole and make it pretty.

Here I recall the very words of Yves. "Poor sparrow! It had for food in its cage a piece of that gray bread which is given in prisons, but it had the appearance of being quite happy, nevertheless. It jumped about just like any other bird."

Some hours afterward, when they reached the transport vessel and the convicts were about to embark for their long voyage, Yves, who had forgotten this old man, passed once more by chance near him.

"Here, take it," said the old man, with a voice that had altogether changed, holding out to him his little cage, "I give it to you. You may perhaps find some use for it; perhaps it may give you pleasure."

"Certainly not," replied Yves. "On the contrary, you must take it with you. It will be your little *comrade* down there."

"Oh," replied the old man, "*he* is no

longer inside. You didn't know that ; you didn't hear, then ! He is no longer there," and two tears of indescribable misery ran down his cheeks.

Through a lurch of the vessel the door of the cage had opened ; the sparrow took fright, flew out, and immediately fell into the sea because of its cut wing. Oh, what a moment of horrible grief to see it fight and die, swept away by the rapid current, and he all the time helpless to rescue it. At first, by a natural impulse, he wished to cry out for help ; to address himself to Yves ; to implore him. . . . But the impulse was immediately stopped by the recollection and the consciousness of his personal degradation. An old wretch like him ! Who would be ready to hear the prayer of such as he ? Could he ever imagine that the ship would be stopped to fish up a drowning sparrow—the poor bird of a convict ? The idea was absurd. Accordingly he remained silent in his place, looking at the little gray body as it disappeared on the



foam of the sea, struggling to the end. He felt terribly lonely now, and forever, and great tears of solitary and supreme despair dimmed his eyes. . Meantime, the young gentleman with the eye-glasses, his chain-fellow, laughed to see an old man weep.

Now that the bird was no longer there, he did not wish to preserve its cage, made with so much solicitude for the lonely dead bird. He offered it to this good soldier who had condescended to listen to his story, anxious to leave him this legacy before departing for his long and last voyage.

And Yves sadly had accepted the empty cage as a present, so that he might not cause any more pain to this old abandoned wretch by appearing to disdain this thing which had cost him so much labor.

I feel that I have not been able to do full justice to all the sadness that there was in this story as it was told me.

It was evening and very late, and I was about to go to bed. I, who had in the

course of my life seen with little emotion so many loud-sounding sorrows and dramas and deaths, perceived with astonishment that the distress of this old man tore my heart, and even threatened to disturb my sleep.

“I wonder,” said I, “if means could be found of sending him another?”

“Yes,” replied Yves, “I also thought of that. I thought of buying him a beautiful bird at a bird dealer’s and bringing it back to him to-morrow with the little cage if there were time to do so before his departure. It would be a little difficult. Moreover, you are the only person who could go into the Roads to-morrow and go on board the transport to find out this old man; and I do not even know his name. And, then, would not people think it very odd?”

“Ah, yes, certainly. As to its being thought odd, there cannot be any mistake about that.” And for a moment I dwelt with pleasure upon the idea, laughing that

good inner laugh which scarcely appears upon the surface.

However, I did not follow up the project, and the following morning when I awoke, and with the first impression gone, the thing appeared to me childish and ridiculous. This disappointment was not one of those which a mere plaything could console. The poor old convict, all alone in the world—the most beautiful bird in Paradise would never replace for him the humble gray little sparrow with cut wing, reared on prison bread, who had been able to awake once more in him a tenderness infinitely sweet, and to draw tears from a heart that was hardened and half-dead.

ROCHESTER, *December*, 1889.



A MANGY CAT.



## A MANGY CAT.

AN old mangy cat, hunted out of its abode no doubt by its owners, had established itself in our street, on the footpath of our house, where a little November sun once more warmed its body. It is the custom with certain people whose pity is a selfish pity thus to send off, as far away as possible, and "lose" the poor animals they care neither to tend nor to see suffer.

All day long it would sit piteously in the corner of a window sill, looking, oh ! so unhappy and so humble, an object of disgust to those who passed, menaced by children and by dogs, in continual danger, and sickening from hour to hour. It lived on offal, picked up with great difficulty in the streets, and there it sat all alone, dragging out its existence as it could, striving to

ward off death. Its poor head was eaten up with disease, covered with sores, and almost without fur, but its eyes, which remained bright, seemed to reflect profoundly. It must have felt in its frightful bitterness the worst of all sufferings to a cat—that of not being able to make its toilet, to lick its fur, and to comb itself with the care cats always bestow on this operation.

To make its toilet! I believe that to beast, as to man, this is one of the most necessary distractions of life. The poorest, the most diseased, and the most decrepit animals at certain hours dress themselves up, and, as long as they are able to find time to do that, have not lost everything in life. But to be no longer able to care for their appearance because nothing can be done before the final moldering away, that has always appeared to me the lowest depth of all the supreme agony. Alas for those poor old beggars who before death have mud and filth on their faces, their bodies scarred with wounds that no longer



can be dressed, the poor diseased animals for whom there is no longer even pity.

It gave me so much misery to look at this forsaken cat that I first sent it something to eat in the street, and then I approachèd it and spoke to it softly (animals very soon learn to understand kind actions and find consolation in them). Accustomed to be hunted, it was first frightened at seeing me stop before it. Its first look was suspicious, filled with reproach and supplication. "Are you also going to drive me away from this last sunny corner?" And then quickly perceiving that I had come from sympathy, and astonished at so much kindness, it addressed to me very softly its poor cat's answer, "Prr! Prr! Prr!" rising out of politeness, and attempting to lift its back, in spite of its weariness, and in hopes that perhaps I would go as far as a caress.

No, my pity, even though I was the only body in the world that felt any for it, did not go this length. That happiness of be-

ing caressed it would never know again, but as a compensation I imagined that I might give it death—immediately, with my own hand, and in a manner almost pleasant.

An hour afterward this was done in the stable. Sylvester, my servant, who had first gone and bought some chloroform, had attracted the cat in quietly, induced it to lie down on the hot hay at the bottom of a wicker basket, which was to be its mortuary chamber. Our preparations did not disquiet it. We had rolled a *carte-de-visite* in the shape of a cone, as we had seen the surgeons do in the ambulance. The cat looked at us with a confiding and happy air, having thought at last it had found a home, people who would take compassion on it, new masters who would heal it.

Meantime, and in spite of my dread of its disease, I leaned down to caress it, having already received from the hands of Sylvester the paste-board cup all covered with poison. While caressing it I tried to

induce it to remain quiet there, to push little by little the end of his nose into the narcotized cup. A little surprised at first, sniffing with vague terror at this unaccustomed smell, it ended by doing as it was asked with such submission that I almost hesitated to continue my work. The annihilation of a thinking animal, even though it be not a human being, has in it something to dumfound us. When one thinks of it, it is always the same revolting mystery, and death besides carries with it so much majesty, that it has the power of giving sublimity in an unexpected, exaggerated form to the most infinitesimal scene from the instant its shadow appears. At this moment I appeared to myself like some black magician, arrogating to myself the right of bringing to the suffering what I believed to be supreme peace, the right of opening to those who had not demanded it the gates of the great night.

Once it lifted its poor head, almost lifeless, to look at me fixedly. Our eyes met

—his, questioning, expressive, asking me with an extreme intensity, “What are you doing to me, you to whom I confided myself, and whom I know so little? What are you doing to me?” And I still hesitated, but its neck fell; its poor disgusting head now supported itself on my hand, which I did not withdraw. A torpor invaded it in spite of itself, and I hoped it would not look at me again.

But it did, one other last time. Cats, as the poor people say, have their souls pinned to their bodies. In a last spasm of life, it looked at me again across the half sleep of death. It seemed even to all at once comprehend everything. “Ah, then it was to kill me and not assist me: I allow it to be done. . . . It is too late. . . . I am falling asleep.”

In fact, I was afraid that I had done wrong. In this world in which we know nothing of anything, men are not allowed to even pity intelligently. Thus, its look, infinitely sad, even while it descended into

the petrification of death, continued to pursue me as with a reproach. "Why did you interfere with my destiny? I might have been able to drag along for a time; to have had still some little thoughts for at least another week. There remained to me sufficient strength to leap on the window sill where the dogs could no more torment me, where I was not cold. In the morning, when the sun came there, I had some moments which were not unbearable, looking at the movement of life around me, interested in the coming and going of other cats, conscious at least of something; while now, I am about to decompose and be transformed into I know not what, that will not remember. Soon *I shall no longer be.*"

I should have recollected, in fact, that even the meanest of things love to prolong their life by every means, even to its utmost limits of misery, preferring anything to the terror of being nothing, of no longer *being*.

When I came back in the evening to see it again I found it stiff and cold, in the attitude of sleep in which I had left it. Then I told Sylvester to close the mortuary basket, to carry it away far from the city, and throw it away in the fields.

A COUNTRY WITHOUT A  
NAME.





## A COUNTRY WITHOUT A NAME.

HERE is a vision which came to me one April night while I slept in a tent in an encampment among the Bani-Hassen in Morocco, at about three days' march from the holy city of Mequinez.

The curtain of the dream rose abruptly on a remote country—oh! so remote—far more remote than the usual earthly distances, so that as soon as the scene began to dimly unveil itself—even before I could see it well—I myself had a sense of this terrible remoteness. It was a plain, rugged, bare desert, where it was terribly hot and dark, under a mournful twilight sky. It had, however, nothing unique in its appearance, as, for example, certain plains in Central Africa which seem insignificant in

themselves, but have a certain distinctive character, and which nevertheless are difficult and dangerous of access. If I had known nothing of the place, I might have believed myself anywhere; but I had a knowledge of the country, a sort of immediate intuition, and therefore it oppressed me to be there, for I felt myself annihilated by these endless distances, by the anguish of infinite journeys from which there was no return.

On this plain, small stunted trees arose whose black branches were twisted back on each other by a series of rectangular fractures, like the arms of Chinese armchairs. They had each only three or four leaves of a soft green, which hung as though exhausted by the heat.

I had a sense that from one moment to another sinister spirits, animals, perils, might arise from every point on this dim horizon, misty with stagnant clouds of darkness. One of the imaginary companions of my journey—I must have had at

least two, whose presence I felt, but who were invisible spirits, voices. One of my companions whispered in my ear, "Ah, now that we are here, you must beware of the *dogs with claws*." "Ah, quite so," I said, with a careless air, as though I were quite familiar with this kind of animal and with the danger they threatened. Clearly I had been there already, and yet these *dogs with claws*, their image suddenly recalled to my spirit, and accentuating still more the notion of this remote expatriation, made me tremble.

They appeared immediately, called forth by the single mention of their name, and with that astonishing facility with which things pass in dreams. They ran more quickly across the shadow of this dark twilight—shot forth like arrows or bullets, so that one had not time to see them approach—frightful black dogs, with nails like cats—claws that seemed to scratch viciously as they pattered swiftly along and lost themselves in the confused distance.

There also passed little women, almost dwarfs, giggling, mocking half-monkeys (in real life I had met two like them in the midst of an African desert, devoured by the sun, under the oppression of a black sky, and in the environs of Obock). These women, doubtless, had claws like the dogs, for as they passed me they clawed in the same way. Then their breath also gave the suggestion of a "claw"; for, when they breathed in my face, it pricked like the points of needles.

Human words cannot describe the real *heart* of this vision—the mystery and the sadness of this plain which thus reappeared; all that rose up in me of disquietude and desolation in merely looking at those wretched little trees, with their long leaves withered by the heat. When I woke up the timid dawn was just beginning to penetrate through the canvas of my tent, and the notion came back to me gradually and slowly of real life—of Africa, of Morocco, of the Beni-Hassen, of

our little encampment in the midst of the widely stretching desert pasturages. Then I regained suddenly a pleasant impression of *home*, of unexpected return. And, good Heavens! how many people are there who will smile at my dread of these little women with claws, who, in my place, would be considerably alarmed by these uncertain tribes around him, by these long journeys from station to station, under a hot sun, without roads over the mountains, and without bridges over the streams? As for me, the territory of the Beni-Hassen appeared comparable to the tamest suburb of Paris in comparison with that country belonging to I know not what planet, going whence I know not, and seen during the unfathomable infinities of time and of space in the inexplicable second-sight of dreams.



A STORY OF TWO CATS.





## A STORY OF TWO CATS.

*(For my son Samuel, when he has learned to read.)*

### I.

I HAVE often seen, with an infinitely sad disquietude, the soul of animals appear in the depths of their eyes. I have seen the soul of a cat, the soul of a dog, the soul of a monkey reveal itself suddenly for a moment as sad as a human soul, and search for my soul with tenderness, supplication, or terror ; and I have perhaps felt a deeper pity for the souls of animals than for those of my brothers, because they are without speech and incapable of coming forth from their semilight, especially when they belong to the humblest and most despised of their kind.

## II.

The two cats whose story I am about to tell are associated in my memory with some of the years of my life which were comparatively happy. Ah! they were quite recent years if you look at them with the dates in your hand, but they are years which to me appear already distant, already remote, carried past me with that rapidity of time which becomes ever and ever more terrible—years that now being past look as if they were colored by the last rays of the dawn, with the final rosy tints of morning and of the openings of life when I put them in contrast with the gray hours of to-day. Thus quickly do our days become darker; thus rapidly do we descend toward everlasting night.

## III.

I must be pardoned for calling them both by the same name of "Moumoutte." In the first place I have never had any power of imagination for coining names for

my cats. It has always been Moumoutte, and the kittens always Mimi; and, indeed, for my part, I do not think there are any names which suit better, which are more *cattish* than those two adorable ones, Mimi and Moumoutte.

I will then preserve to the poor little heroines of these stories the names they bore in real life—for the one White Moumoutte, for the other Gray Moumoutte, or Chinese Moumoutte.

## IV.

By order of seniority, it is White Moumoutte that I must first introduce. On her *carte-de-visite*, in fact, she had engraved her title as first cat in my house:

MADAME MOUMOUTTE BLANCHE,

*Première Chatte*

CHEZ M. PIERRE LOTI.

It is almost ten years ago—that memorable, joyous evening on which I saw her for the first time! It was a winter even-

ing on one of my periodic returns to my fireside after some campaign or other in the East. I had just arrived home, and I was warming myself in the large drawing-room before a wood fire between mamma and Aunt Claire, who were seated at the two corners of the fireplace. Suddenly something burst with a jump into the room like a rocket, fell, then madly rolled itself on the ground, white as snow on the somber red carpet.

“Ah,” said Aunt Claire, “you did not know then? I must introduce her to you. This is our new Moumoutte. What would you have? We had to have another; a mouse had found its way right into our little room below.”

There had been in our house a pretty long interregnum without Moumouttes because we mourned a certain cat from Senegal which had been brought home by me after my first campaign, and, after being adored for two years, had, one morning in June, after a short illness, died looking at

me with an expression of supreme prayer ; I myself had buried it at the foot of a tree in our courtyard.

I caught up, to see it better, the beautiful ball of fur which spread so white upon the red carpet. I took her in both hands of course, for this is a special precaution which I never omit in dealing with cats, and which seems to say to them at once, "Here is a man who understands us ; who knows how to touch us ; who is one of our friends, and whose caresses one can condescend to receive with amiability."

It was very affable—the little phiz of this new Moumoutte ; its eyes bright, almost childlike ; the end of its little nose rosy red, and then—nothing more, for the remainder was lost in the depths of an Angora coat, silky, clean, sweet-smelling, while exquisite to stroke and pet. Moreover, it was marked and spotted exactly like the dead Moumoutte from Senegal—which perhaps was what decided the choice of mamma and Aunt Claire, so that

a slight confusion of the two in my somewhat volatile heart might be brought about in the end. On her ears she had a very large black bonnet, fixed straight, and forming a fillet for her bright eyes. A short black pelerine was thrown over her shoulders, and finally she had a splendid black tail like a superb plume, which was agitated with the perpetual motion of a fan to drive away flies. The stomach and the paws were as white as the down of a swan, and altogether she gave you the impression of a large bundle of fur, so light as to be almost without weight, and moved by a capricious little machinery of nerves always on the stretch.

Moumoutte after this examination ran away from me to begin once more its play, and in those first moments after my arrival—which were necessarily melancholy because they marked one more stage in life—the new white cat with its black spots insisted on my taking notice of her, jumping on my knees to bid me welcome, or

stretching herself on the ground with an affected lassitude to make me admire the more the whiteness of her stomach and her silky neck. While this Moumoutte was thus gamboling, my eyes rested with devotion on the two dear faces which were smiling at me there, a little aged, and framed in locks a little grayer; on the family portraits, which preserved the sameness of expression and age in their frames on the wall; on the objects so familiar and in the same places; on the thousand things of this hereditary home that had remained unchanged also, while I had passed with a changed heart over the changing world. And this was the picture, persistent and distinct, which was to remind me of her, even after her death—a foolish little animal, white, unexpected, gamboling on a red ground between the mourning dress of mamma and Aunt Claire on the evening of one of my great home-comings.

Poor Moumoutte during the first winter

of her life was the familiar little demon, the little household imp that brightened the solitude of those two blessed guardians of my fireside, mamma and Aunt Claire.

While I was wandering on distant seas, when the house had become again large and empty, in the sad twilight of December, in the long evenings without end, she remained their faithful companion, tormenting them now and then, and leaving on their irreproachable black gowns tufts of her white fur. Entirely without discretion, she used to install herself on their knees, on their worktables, even in their workbaskets, twisting their balls of cotton or their skeins of silk, and then they would say with terrible looks, but almost laughing in spite of themselves, "Ah, that cat; there is no making her behave. Be off! Be off! Did ever anybody see such manners? It is too bad." There was even a whip expressly for her which she was occasionally allowed to see. She loved them after her cat manner—that is to say,



without obedience, but with a touching confidence; and if it were only for this, her little soul, incomplete and fantastic, deserves that I should remember her.

In the spring, when the March sun began to warm her coat, she would experience an ever novel surprise—that of seeing her comrade and friend Sulima, the tortoise, wake up and come out of the earth. During the beautiful month of May, she would generally feel an irresistible desire for expansion and for liberty enter into her soul, and then there came nocturnal disappearances in the gardens and on the roofs of the neighbors. In the summer she would have the languors of a Creole. During entire days she would lie in a stupor of comfort and of heat, crouched on the old walls among the honeysuckle and the roses, or stretched on the ground, presenting to the burning sun her white stomach on the white stones between the pots of blooming cactus.

Extremely careful of her person and at

ordinary times sedate, correct in her behavior, aristocratic down to the tips of her nails, she was nevertheless quite intractable with other cats, and became quite rude the moment a visitor presented itself to her. In the courtyard, which she considered as her domain, she would never allow a stranger the right to appear; if above the wall of a neighboring garden two ears or the nose of a cat dimly made their appearance, or even if anything stirred in the branches of the ivy, she would dart out herself like a young fury, with her fur erect down to the end of her tail, impossible to hold, and no longer her usual self; then came cries in the worst taste, followed by a rough and tumble and the blows of conflicting claws.

To sum up, she was fiercely independent, and she was usually disobedient, but she was affectionate in her good moments, so caressing and so wheedling, and she uttered such a pretty little cry of joy when she returned among us after one of

her vagabond excursions in the gardens of the neighborhood. She was now about five years old, and she was in all the splendor of her Angora beauty, with attitudes of superb dignity and the airs of a queen. I had had time to become attached to her by a series of absences and returns, considering her as one of the things of the hearth, as one of the beings of the household, when there was born, three thousand leagues from her home, in the Gulf of Peking, and of a family more than humble, she who was to become her inseparable friend—the strangest little person I have ever known—Chinese Moumoutte.

## V.

MADAME MOUMOUTTE CHINOISE,

*Deuxième Chatte*

CHEZ M. PIERRE LOTI.

Singular, indeed, was the destiny which handed over to me this Moumoutte of a

yellow race, and the offspring of parents at once poor and without any title to beauty.

It was at the end of the war there, on one of those evenings of conflict which were so frequent then. I do not know how it was that this little animal, escaped from some junk in the midst of disorder, had, after jumping aboard our vessel in its terror, sought an asylum in my room under my bed. She was yellow, not yet of adult figure, miserable-looking, emaciated, plaintive, having without doubt, like her parents and her masters, lived sparingly on the heads of fish with a little rice cooked in water, and I took so much pity on her that I ordered my orderly to procure for her something to eat and drink.

With a humble and grateful air she accepted my kindness, and I can see her still as she slowly approached toward this unexpected repast, advancing first one foot and then the other, her eyes all the time fixed on mine to assure herself that she was not deceived, and that it was really in-

tended for her. Next morning, of course, I wanted to put her out. After having had a fairly good breakfast prepared for her, I clapped my hands violently, stamping with both my feet at the same time as is usual in such cases, and saying, in a very gruff voice, "Get out, little Moumoutte." But no ; the Chinese young lady refused to go. Evidently she had no dread of me, understanding by instinct that all this noise was mere bluster. With an air of saying to me, "I know well you will do me no harm," she remained crouched in her corner, lying low upon the ground in the pose of a suppliant, and fixing upon me her two dilated eyes, a human look in them which I have never seen in any cat but her.

What was to be done ? I could not establish this cat as a permanent resident in my cabin, and, besides, an animal so ugly and so delicate, what an encumbrance she would be for the future !

Then I took her on my shoulder, with a thousand precautions, saying to her at the

same time, "I am very sorry, my little Moumoutte," and then I resolutely took it outside to the other end of the battery, in the midst of the sailors, who, as a rule, extend a hospitable welcome to all kinds of cats. Flattened against the timber of the bridge, and her head turned toward me as if to implore me with a look of prayer, she began to run with a quaintly humble step in the direction of my room, which she reached before me. When I arrived there after her, I found her crouched in a little corner, and her eyes were so expressive that courage failed me to drive her out anew. This is how the Chinese cat took me for a master.

My orderly, who had probably been won to her side from the commencement of the struggle, completed her installation on the spot by placing on the ground, under my bed, a stuffed basket for her to sleep on, and one of my china dishes most thoughtfully filled with sand—a detail that gave me a cold shiver!

## VI.

Never going out for air, day or night, she lived seven months in the same obscurity amid the continual swaying of this berth, and little by little an intimacy was established between us, and we acquired at the same time a power of mutual penetration very rare between a man and an animal.

I remember the first day when our relations became really affectionate. We were out in the open on the north of the Yellow Sea, in mournful September weather. The first fogs of autumn had already formed themselves on the waters, which had suddenly become clouded and unquiet, and in these climates the chills and the somber skies come quick, bringing to us Europeans away on the wing a melancholy that grows greater the further we feel from home. We were going toward the east, and there was a heavy swell, on which we were rocked in a monotonous manner that caused plaintive creakings throughout the



whole of the vessel. It had become necessary to close the porthole, and my berth had only a dim light through the thick glass, over which now and then the crest of waves threw themselves in grand transparencies, alternating with intervals of darkness. I had taken up my position at the narrow little sliding desk, which is the same in all our berths on ships, with the intention of writing during one of those rather rare moments in which the service leaves one in complete peace, and in which one is moved to retire, as it were, into one's cloister cell.

Chinese Moumoutte had lived under my bed for about two weeks. She had lived there very retired, discreet, and melancholy, observing the proprieties and the strict limitations of her dish filled with sand. She showed herself little, being almost always hidden, and overcome apparently by homesickness for the native land which she was never more to see.

Suddenly I saw her appear in the semi-



darkness, stretch herself out slowly, as if to give herself still time for reflection, then advance toward me, hesitating, stopping now and then, sometimes even putting on all her Chinese graces ; she held one of her paws in the air for some seconds before deciding to lay it down on the ground to make a step forward.

She looked at me fixedly with a questioning air.

What could she desire from me ? She was not hungry, that was plain. A little dish to her taste was served twice every day by my order. What was it, then ?

When she was quite near, so that she almost touched my leg, she sat down, moved her tail round, and uttered a little cry, very softly.

Then she continued to look at me, but to look at me right in the eyes, which already proved the possession in her little head of a whole world of intelligent conceptions. She must first have understood that I was not a thing but a thinking being, capable of

the unexpected asylum where the short mysterious dream of her cat's life could finish with the most peace and the least suffering. But I could not imagine this delicate little Chinese, with her pauper coat, the fellowlodger of the proud and jealous White Moumoutte, who would certainly maul her as soon as she saw her appear. No, that was impossible.

On the other hand, to abandon her to chance friends when we put in at a port—that I might have done, perhaps, if she had been strong and beautiful; but this plaintive little thing with her human eyes held me by a profound feeling of pity.

#### VIII.

Our intimacy, the result of our common isolation, grew daily closer. The weeks and the months passed in the midst of a continual change in the external world, while everything remained immutably the same in this obscure corner of the ship where the cat had fixed her home. For us

men, who sail over the seas, there are always the fresh breezes that fan us, the life in the open air, the night under the stars, and the wanderings through foreign lands. She, on the contrary, knew nothing of the immense world through which her prison moved—nothing of her kind or of the sun or of the grass or of the shade. And without ever leaving her home she lived there in the prison of this berth. It was a place that was sometimes as cold as ice when the porthole opening admitted a great draught of wind which swept away everything. More frequently it was a stove, somber and suffocating, where the Chinese perfumes burned before old idols as in a Buddhist temple. For her companions of her dreams, she had monsters of wood and of bronze, nailed to the walls, and laughing with a sinister laugh; in the midst of an accumulation of sacred things, captured from her country in the midst of a pillage, she blanched from want of air between hangings of silk which she loved

to tear with her little unquiet and nervous claws.

As soon as I entered my room she would make her appearance, darting out with an imperceptible cry of joy from behind a curtain of shelves, or a box, like some imp. If by chance I sat down to write, Moumoutte, with much wheedling and tenderness, in quest of protection and caresses, would slowly take her place on my knees and follow with her eyes the progress of my pen, blotting out sometimes with an entirely unexpected stroke from her paw such lines as did not meet with her approval.

The bumps in bad weather, the noise of our cannon, caused her a terror that was dangerous. In such moments she jumped against the walls, twisted round like one possessed, and then stopped, panting, and went and curled herself up in her corner looking sad and frightened.

Her cloistered youth had in it something unhealthy and strange, which in-

creased daily. Her appetite, however, remained good, and the dishes continued to be eaten with satisfaction. But she was thin—singularly thin; her nose became long and her ears drawn out, like those of a bat. Her large yellow eyes sought mine always with an expression of timid affection or of anxious inquiry on the unknown in life, which was as troublesome and as unfathomable to her small intelligence as to mine.

Very inquisitive as to things outside, in spite of her inexplicable obstinacy about never crossing the threshold of my door, she did not neglect to examine with extreme attention every new object which came into our common room, bringing to her the confused impression of the exotic countries through which our ships had passed. For example, I remember once to have seen her so interested as to forget her breakfast in a bouquet of sweet-smelling orchids, which were very extraordinary to her who had never known gardens or

pity and accessible to the mute prayer of a look. Further, she must have known that my eyes were open to her eyes—that is to say, mirrors in which her little soul could anxiously seek to find the reflection of mine. And, indeed, they are frightfully near to us when you think of it—the animals who are capable of thinking two such things.

As for me, I examined with attention for the first time the little visitor who now for almost two weeks had shared my cabin.

She had the yellow color of a wild hare; was covered with spots like a tiger; her nose and neck were white—in fact, she was ugly, and miserably thin, or, rather, she was bizarre rather than ugly to a man like me, emancipated from all the commonplace rules of beauty. In other respects she was rather different from our French cats. She was low upon her paws, and not unlike a marten with a huge tail. Her ears were large and straight, and her face by its sharpness suggested the corner of a wall; but the charm was in her eyes, which were

raised toward her temples like all eyes in extreme Asia, of a beautiful golden yellow in place of green, incessantly mobile, astonishingly expressive, and while I looked at her I allowed my hand to descend on her strange little head and stroked her coat as a first caress.

What she felt was something different and far removed from the mere impression of physical comfort. She had the sense of protection, of sympathy with her in her distress and abandonment. That is the reason Miss Moumoutte had come forth from her dark nest. What she had determined to ask me, after so much hesitation, was not food or drink. It was for her little cat-soul a little companionship in this world, a little friendship.

Where had she learned all this—this wastrel cat, never flattered by any friendly hand, never loved by anybody—unless, perhaps, in the paternal junk by some little Chinese child without playthings and without caresses—brought into this swarm-



ing mass of yellow humanity like a superfluous plant, as miserable and as hungry as herself, who also, in disappearing, would leave as little trace behind?

Then a little delicate paw was placed timidly on me—oh! with what delicacy and with what discretion; and after having for yet a long time studied and besought me, Moumoutte, thinking she might rush things, jumped at last on my knees.

She installed herself there in a lump, but with such tact and such discretion, making herself quite light, scarcely leaning on me, and almost without weight; and looking at me all the time. She remained there a long time, interfering with me certainly. But I had not the courage to drive her away, which I certainly should have done if she had been a pretty joyous animal in the splendor of life. All this time, afraid of the least of my motions, she did not lose sight of me; not that she feared I would do her any harm—she was too intelligent to believe me capable of



that—but with the air of saying to me, “Am I really disturbing you? Am I annoying you?” Then her eyes became more expressive and more wheedling still, saying to me quite clearly, “In this autumn day, so sad to the hearts of cats, since we are here together, both isolated beings, in this home that is being rolled about so and lost in the midst of I know not what danger and infinitude, suppose we give, one to the other, a little of that kindness which softens troubles, which resembles the immaterial that defies death, which is called affection, and expresses itself from time to time by a caress?”

## VII.

When the treaty of friendship was signed between this animal and me, I felt some disquietude as to the future. What was to be done with her? Was I to bring her back to France over so many thousands of miles and through so many difficulties? Clearly my fireside was for her

forests, had never seen any flowers but those that had been gathered into and had died in my bronze vases.

In spite of her ugly and shabby coat, which, at first sight, gave her the appearance of a cat from the gutter, she had in her face a rare distinction, and the least movements of her paws had a patrician grace. Thus she produced upon me the effect of some little Princess, condemned by the bad fairies to share my solitude under an inferior form, and I thought of that story of the mother of the great Tchengis Khan, which an American priest at Constantinople, my professor in the Turkish language, had given me to translate :

The young Princess Ulemalik-Kureklu, consecrated to death before her birth in case she ever saw the light of day, was imprisoned in a dark dungeon.

“What is this thing they call the world? Is there any space elsewhere? and is this tower *in* anything?”

“No, Princess, this is not the world; it is out-

side, and it is much larger. And then there are things which are called stars and sun and moon."

"Oh!" replied Ulemalik, "let me die, but let me see."

### IX.

It was at the end of winter and in the first warm days of March when Chinese Moumoutte made her entrance into my house in France.

White Moumoutte, to whom my eyes had grown unaccustomed during my campaign in China, still bore at this epoch of the year the royal coat of cold weather, and I never knew her more imposing.

The contrast would be the more striking with the other, emaciated, and with its poor coat like that of a wild hare, and with holes in places as though it had been eaten by moths. Thus I was very much embarrassed when my servant Sylvester, returning with her from the ship, raised with a half-waggish air the lid of the basket where he had placed her, and when this small Chinese

friend had to come forth in the midst of all my assembled family.

The first impression was to be deplored ; and I recall all the conviction my Aunt Claire put into the simple phrase.

“ Oh, dear, how ugly she is ! ”

She was, indeed, very ugly. And how and under what pretext and with what excuses could I introduce her to White Moumoutte. Not being able to hit on anything, I took her for the moment into an isolated granary—to hide them from each other and to gain time for reflection.

X.

Their first interview was something terrible.

It came about unexpectedly some days afterward in the kitchen—a spot which has irresistible attractions, and where cats who live in the same house are bound some day to meet. In all haste, they came to fetch me, and I ran. There were inhuman cries ; a ball, a heap of fur and claws, com-

posed of their two little bodies, entangled in each other, rolled and leaped ; shivering glasses, plates, dishes, while the white coat and the hare-colored fur flew in little tufts all around. It was necessary to intervene with energy, and to separate them by throwing a bottle of water over both. . . . I was horrified.

## XI.

Trembling, scratched, her heart beating as though it would burst, Chinese Moumoutte, gathered up in my arms, crouched up against me and gradually grew tranquil, her nerves relieved, and with a look of sweet security. Then she became gradually soft and inert, like something without life, which with cats is an expression of supreme confidence in those who hold them.

White Moumoutte, pensive and somber, looked at us with wide-open eyes ; and a line of reasoning began to dawn in her jealous little head. She, who from one

year's end to the other mauled on the wall the same neighbors, male and female, without ever becoming accustomed to their appearance, began to understand that this foreigner belonged to me since I took it thus into my embrace, and since she took to it tenderly. Thus she must do it no further injury, but must become resigned and tolerant of its presence in the house.

My surprise and my admiration were great to see them pass each other a moment after, each disdainful of the other, but calm, very correct. It was over; during the rest of their lives they were never angry with one another. .

## XII.

Ah! the springtime of that year—how well I remember it. Although very short, as all seasons appear to be now, it was one of the last of those that still retained for me the charm, and even an approach to the mysterious enchantment, of those of my childhood. Moreover, it was passed amid the

same surroundings of the same flowers renewed in the same place on the same antique jessamines and the same rose-trees. After each of my campaigns I have come to forget in a very few days the continents and the vast seas. Once more, as at life's start, I limit my external world to those old walls clad with ivy and with moss which surrounded me when I was a little child. The distant countries, where I have gone so many times to live, appear to me as unreal as in the days when, before seeing them, I dreamed of them. The illimitable horizons close in; everything quietly contracts, and quite naturally I reach the point of almost forgetting that there exists ought else than our mossy stones, our arbutus trees, our vines, and our sweet white roses.

I was building up a Buddhist pagoda at this time in a corner of my house with the remains of a temple destroyed *là-bas*. Enormous chests were being opened every day in my courtyard, spreading that inde-



finable and complex odor of China. They unpacked in the beautiful new sunshine shafts of columns, stones of arches, ugly altars and ancient idols. It was amusing, and curious also, to see these things reappear one by one, and then spread themselves on the grass and moss of the old familiar stones—all these monsters of farthest Asia, making the same grimaces under our paler sun as they had made in their own homes for years—for centuries. From time to time, mamma and Aunt Claire came to inspect them, frightened by their astounding ugliness. But it was Chinese Moumoutte who assisted with most interest at these unpackings. She recognized her traveling companions; she smelt at everything with confused recollections of her own country; then, from her habit of living in the dark, she hastened to creep into the empty chests and to hide herself there where the idols had been, under this exotic hay that smelt of musk and sandal.

It was truly a beautiful and very



bright spring, with an excess of the music of the swallow and the martens in the air.

And Chinese Moumoutte wondered at it exceedingly. Poor little hermit! reared in a stifling twilight, she was at once alarmed and delighted by the broad daylight, the air soft to breathe, the neighborhood of other cats. She made at this period long exploring excursions in the courtyard, sniffing at all the young blades of grass, all the new sprouts that came forth from the warmed earth fresh and sweet-smelling. These forms and shades which, old as the world, the plants reproduce unconsciously every April, these laws of immutability under which the first leaves unfold and come out, were things absolutely new and surprising to her who had never seen any verdure or any spring. And White Moumoutte, formerly the sole and jealous sovereign of these realms, had consented to share them, allowing the other to wander at her pleasure in the midst of the arbutus trees, the flowerpots, and among the old

gray walls, under the spreading branches. It was the shores of the miniature lake in particular—so intimately associated with my memories of childhood—that attracted her. There in the grass, which every day grew higher and thicker, she walked, bending down like a hunted deer, a trick inherited without doubt from her ancestors, Mongolian cats with primitive manners. She hid herself behind the Liliputian rocks, buried herself under the ivy like a little tiger in a miniature virgin forest.

It was an amusement to me to watch her goings and comings, her sudden halts, her surprises. And she, feeling herself watched, would turn and look at me, becoming immovable all at once in an attitude that was becoming to her—an attitude very graceful but affected, after the Chinese fashion, with a paw in front of her in the air in the manner of those persons who, when taking hold of an object, coquettishly lift their little finger. And her droll yellow eyes were then extremely

expressive—speaking eyes, as good people say. “You have no objection to my continuing my walk?” she seemed to ask. “It doesn’t put you out in any way, does it? You see, I walk and move with such lightness, with such discretion. And you’ll admit ’tis all very pretty here—all these extraordinary little green things which scatter their fresh odors, and this good air, so pure, and this vast space! And these other things, also, which I see around me, which they call stars and the sun and the moon! How different from our old home, and how pleasant it is to be in this country where we have both arrived!”

This place, so new to her, was to me the oldest and the most familiar of all places on earth—the spot where the smallest details, the smallest blades of grass, were known to me from the first uncertain and astonished hours of my existence. To such a degree was this the case that I was attached to it with all my heart; that I loved in a peculiar fashion—a little idolatrous

perhaps—some of the plants that are in it, vines, jessamines, and a certain dielytra rose, which every March shows in the same place its buds red with young sap, displays very quickly its early leaves, gives the same flowers once again in April, grows yellow in the sun of June, then burns in the sun of August, and seems to die.

And while the little Chinese Moumoutte allowed herself to be enticed by all these airs of joy, of youth, of opening life, I, on the contrary, who knew that all this passes away, felt for the first time ascend into my life the sense of evening, of that great and inexorable night without a morrow, of that last autumn which will be followed by no springtime. And, with infinite melancholy, I looked in this gay courtyard, brightened by the new sun, at the two dear figures with white hair that walked up and down there in their robes of mourning, mamma and Aunt Claire. I watched them as they stooped, as they had done for so many a spring before, to recog-

nize what buds had pushed through the earth, and raised their heads to look at the buds of glycine and of roses. And when their black dresses appeared and reappeared from the back of that green avenue which forms the courtyard of our family mansion, I particularly remarked that their step was slower and more infirm. Alas, for the early day when, perhaps, I would never see them like this again in the green avenue! Must such a time ever really come? When they have gone from me, I have the illusive idea that it will not be a complete departure so long as I shall be on this spot, able to recall their sweet presence. I believe that in the summer evenings I shall sometimes see their blessed shadows pass under the old jessamines and the old vine trees; and that something of them will remain dimly in the plants which they have cared for—in the falling honeysuckle, in the old dielytra rose.

## XIII.

While Chinese Moumoutte lived this open-air life, she became visibly more beautiful every day. The holes in her hare-colored coat were replaced by a quite new fur ; she became less thin, more smooth and more careful of her person, and no longer had a dissipated appearance. Once mamma and Aunt Claire stopped to speak to her, amused by her unique manners, by her expressive eyes, and by her soft little answers of "Prr ! Prr !" which she never failed to give when anybody addressed her.

"Really," they said, "this young China lady looks as if she felt happy with us ; we have never seen a cat with a happier face."

It was the happy and grateful look which she had for him who brought her thither. And the happiness of young animals is complete, perhaps, because they have no sense of the inexorable future. She passed days

in delicious reflection, in attitudes of supreme comfort, stretched carelessly on the stones and the moss, enjoying the silence—a little melancholy to me—of this house which neither the roar of cannon nor the crash of wave ever troubled. She had arrived at the port, remote and tranquil, at the last halting-place in her life, and she rested herself, unconscious of the coming end.

## XIV.

One fine day, without any period of transition, and by a sudden caprice, the toleration of White Moumoutte for Chinese Moumoutte was transformed into a tender friendship. She approached with deliberation, and then, all of a sudden, she kissed the lips of the other one, which among cats its the equivalent of a most affectionate embrace.

Sylvester, who was present at the scene, was, however, skeptical.

“Did you,” said I, “see the kiss of peace between the Moumouttes?”



“Oh no, sir,” replied he, with that perfectly knowing air which he always assumes when any question arises with regard to the inner life of my cats, horses, or any other animal. “No, sir, White Moumoutte simply wanted to satisfy herself, by smelling the muzzle of the Chinese, whether she had not just eaten her food.”

He was wrong, however. I found they were friends from this day. You could see them, seated in the same chair, eat their dinners from the same dish, and every morning run to give each other “good-morrow” by rubbing the ends of their comical noses, the one yellow, the other rose-colored.

#### XV.

By the time we had got to saying, “The Moumouttes have done this or that,” they were an intimate and inseparable couple, consulting each other and imitating each other down to the least and most trivial actions of their life—combing each other,



licking each other, making their toilet in common with mutual tenderness.

White Moumoutte continued to be the special cat of Aunt Claire, while the Chinese remained my little faithful friend, with always her same tender manner of following me with her eyes, of answering to the least call of my voice. Scarcely could I seat myself when a light paw would place itself softly upon me, as in the old days on board ship; two yellow eyes would interrogate me with an intense human expression. Then, houp-la! Chinese sat on my knees; very slow in selecting her position, scratching with her two paws, turning herself around in this direction and then in that, and she had just nicely installed herself when I was ready to go away.

What a strange mystery, what a problem of soul—the constant affection of an animal and its enduring gratitude!

## XVI.

They were very much spoiled, these two Moumouttes. They were admitted into the dining room at meal-hours; they were found seated at my side, one on the right and the other on the left; recalling themselves from time to time to my memory by a little, discreet pat of their paws on my napkin, and enjoying the scraps which I gave them for dinner, like a schoolboy who knew he was at fault, and from the end of my own fork.

In telling all this I am afraid that I injure my reputation, which already it appears is so stained by eccentricity and want of decorum. I, nevertheless, am in a position to expose a certain Academician, who, having done me the honor of sitting at my table, did not abstain from offering to each of them in his own spoon a little Chantilly cream.\*

\* This episode was written before the election of M. Loti to the French Academy.

## XVII.

The summer which followed was for Chinese Moumoutte an absolutely delicious period in her life. With her originality and her air of distinction, she had become almost pretty, and then also her fur had been renewed. Around in the world of cats, at the bottom of the garden and on the roofs, the report had circulated of the arrival of this piquant stranger, and the admirers were numerous who came to mew under the windows in the beautiful warm nights perfumed with honeysuckle. Toward the middle of September, the two Moumouttes knew almost at the same time the joy of maternity. White Moumoutte was, as may be imagined, a mother on a large scale; Chinese Moumoutte, on the other hand, when the first moments of surprise had passed, was seen to lick tenderly the prized and tiny little gray kitten, streaked like a tiger, who was her only son.

## XVIII.

The reciprocal affection of these two families was very touching; the funny little Chinaman and the Angora, round as a powder puff, played together, and were cleaned, combed, and fed by either one or the other of the two Moumouttes with an almost equal solicitude.

## XIX.

Winter is the season in which cats become especially the guests of the household, the companions at all moments at the fireside, sharing with us the dancing flames, the vague melancholies of twilight and our unfathomable dreams.

It is also, as everybody knows, the epoch of their greatest beauty, their greatest luxury of coat and of fur. Chinese Moumoutte, when the cold came first, had no longer any holes in her coat, and White Moumoutte had put up an imposing cravat, a boa of whitest snow which framed her

face like a ruff *à la Medici*. Their affection was increased by the pleasure that they experienced in warming each other near the hearth; on cushions, on arm-chairs, they slept whole days in each other's arms, rolled into a single ball, in which you could no longer distinguish their heads or tails.

It was Chinese Moumoutte especially which could never get near enough to the other. If, after returning from some expedition in the open air, she perceived her friend White Moumoutte asleep before the fire, very gently, ever so gently, she approached, with strategy as careful as though she were trying to surprise a mouse, while the other, always capricious, nervous, irritated at being disturbed, sometimes gave a light stroke of her paw or a smack. Chinese Moumoutte never replied, but, lifting only her little hand, like a menacing gesture in fun, she said to me from the corner of her eye, "Isn't she a difficult creature to deal with? But I don't take

her seriously, of course, you know." With an increase of precautions she always succeeded in her purpose, which was that they should sleep one with the other, her head buried in the beautiful snowy fur—and before going to sleep she said to me, still with that half-look of an eye scarcely opened, "That is just what I want; I am all right now."

## XX.

Ah, those wonderful winter evenings of ours at that time! In the depths of the house, silent, dark, empty, and almost too large, in the very warm little room of the *rez-de-chaussée*, which looked out on the courtyard and on the gardens, mamma and Aunt Claire sat under the hanging lamp—in this place familiar during so many previous and similar winters; and most frequently I sat there also, in order not to lose one moment of their presence on earth and of my association with them. In another part of the house, far away from us,

I left my workroom—my Aladdin room—black and fireless, merely for the pleasure of passing our evenings all together in this little room, which was the most secret *coulisse* of our family life, a place where we were more unconstrainedly at home than anywhere else. No other place besides has ever given me so complete and so sweet an impression of a nest, nowhere have I been able to warm myself with more soothing melancholy than in front of the flames in the wide fire of this hearth. The windows, with shutters, which in our confident tranquillity were never closed; the closed door, with just a suggestion of rusticity, looked out on the black winter foliage and the laurel trees, on the ivy, on the walls, sometimes illuminated by a moonbeam. No noise reached us from the street, which was pretty far away, and which, besides, was very quiet, scarcely disturbed from time to time by the songs of sailors celebrating their return home. No, we heard rather the noise of the country,



whose presence we felt almost near, just beyond the low gardens and the town ramparts. In the summer we heard the immense concert of the grasshoppers in those marshy plains which surrounded us, but were joined together like steppes, and from moment to moment the tiny note, like the sad flute, of the owl. In the winter, on those nights of which I speak, we heard some cry of a seabird, and especially the long moaning of the western wind coming from the sea.

On the large table, covered with a certain flowered cloth which I knew all my life, Mamma and Aunt Claire spread their precious workbaskets, where they had things which I would call fundamental, if I dared to employ a word which in the present case has a meaning to me alone—all those little things which have taken the place of relics in my eyes, which have acquired in my memory, in my life, an importance of the very first order—embroi-



dery scissors, handed down from ancestors, which were lent to me when I was quite a child, with a thousand warnings, to amuse myself in cutting things up; reels made of the rare wood of the colonies, brought from there by sailors, which in the past had caused me so many a dream; needle-cases, glasses, thimbles, boxes. I knew them all, and how much I loved them!—those poor little nothings, so precious to me, which I remembered as they were laid out for so many years on the old flowered tablecloth by the hands of mamma and Aunt Claire. After every long voyage, with what a feeling of tenderness I found them again and gave them my greeting on arrival! I employed just a moment ago for them the word “fundamental”—a word whose inappropriateness I acknowledge; but here is how I explain it: if anybody were to destroy them, if they ceased to exist in the same eternal place, I would have felt an impression of having made

one long step further toward the annihilation of myself, toward dust, toward oblivion.

And when they have both departed—mamma and Aunt Claire—it seems to me that these dear little objects, religiously preserved by them, will call back again their presence, will prolong for a little their sojourn among us.

The Moumouttes, of course, also took possession of this room, sleeping together in one single warm ball on some armchair or some stool, as near as possible to the fire, and their unexpected awakenings, their reflections, their curious ideas, amused our evenings, which were somewhat taciturn. White Moumoutte was once seized by a sudden desire of being no longer in our company. She jumped upon the table, and seated herself with gravity on the work of Aunt Claire, turning her back upon her, after having unexpectedly rubbed her face with her imposing black tail. Then she remained there, impolite and

obstinate, in contemplation before the flame of the lamp.

Or sometimes, on one of those nights of sharp frost which disturb the nerves of cats, you heard suddenly in the neighboring garden a discussion, and "Miaou, miaou, miaou!" Then the quiet robe of fur, which slumbered so still, became suddenly erect, with two heads and two pairs of ears. Once again came the sound of "Miaou, miaou, miaou!" It was not going to stop, then! White Moumoutte, rising with resolution, her fur erect for war, rushed from one door to another, seeking an outlet, as if called outside by an imperious duty of supreme importance. "No, no, Moumoutte," said Aunt Claire; "you need not mix yourself up in this, I assure you. It will be all right without you." The Chinese, on the other hand, always calmer, and not anxious for perilous adventures, contented herself with looking at me from the corner of her eye with an air at once intelligent and ironical; she said

to me, "Am I not right to remain neutral?"

A certain part of me, quite tranquil, restored to serenity, and almost childlike, came back again there in the evenings in this little room so sweetly silent, at this table where mamma and Aunt Claire worked; and if now and then I remember, with a dumb, internal emotion, that I had had an Oriental heart, an African heart, and a heap of other hearts besides—that I had dreamed, under different suns, dreams and fancies without number—all this now appeared to me very remote, and forever done with. And this past of wanderings made me enjoy more completely the present hour, with its repose, this *entr'acte* in that strictly private and domestic side of my life, which would astonish so many people, and perhaps make them smile. With a sincerity that for the minute was complete, I said to myself that I would never go away again, that nothing in the world was as good as the peace of being

just there, and in finding over again some of the emotions of one's young soul; of feeling around one, in this nest of childhood, the indefinable sense of protection against nothingness and death; of divining through the glass of the window, athwart the darkness of the foliage, and under the winter moonlight, the courtyard, which in early days was regarded as almost the whole earth, and which has remained just the same, with its ivy, its little rooks, and its old walls, and which might, *mon Dieu!* regain once more in my eyes its importance, its vastness of the olden days, and, perhaps, be peopled once again in the same dreams! Above all this, I said to myself that nothing in the great wide world was worth the sweet joy of looking at mamma and Aunt Claire, seated at their worktable, leaning toward the flowered tablecloth, with their caps of black lace and the plumes of their white locks.

Ah! one evening I can recall there was a real cat scene. Even to-day I cannot think of it without laughing.

It was a frosty night about Christmas. In the midst of the profound silence, we had heard passing over the roofs, across the cold and quiet sky, a flight of wild geese which were emigrating to other climes. It was like the distant noise of a shooting-gallery—those sharp and multitudinous voices that shouted aloud in the void, and then were soon lost in the airy distance. “Do you hear? do you hear?” said Aunt Claire to me, with a little smile and an affectation of dread, in ridicule of me; for in my childhood I was greatly frightened by these nocturnal flights of birds. To hear it one must have, indeed, a quick ear and be in a silent place.

Calm then returned, and so completely that one could hear the crackling moan of the wood in the fireplace, and the regular breathing of the two cats seated in the corner of the hearth.

Suddenly a certain large, yellow tom-cat, whom White Moumoutte detested, but who, nevertheless, persecuted her with his

attentions, appeared behind the glass looking into the courtyard, standing out in the light from the black background of the foliage, and looked at Moumoutte with a brazen and yet bewildered air, and with a formidable and provoking “miaou !” Then Moumoutte jumped to the window, like a tennis-ball, and there, nose to nose, on either side of the window, there was a splendid battle—a volley of frightful insults in voices hoarse with rage, violent raps and slaps across the pane, which made a frightful uproar, but, of course, produced no effect. Oh ! the terror of mamma and Aunt Claire, jumping from their seats at the first moment of surprise ; and, then, the hearty laughter ! It was irresistible—the comic effect of all this sudden and absurd tumult, succeeding to a meditative silence so deep ; and especially the look of the yellow tom-cat, slapped and discomfited, whose eyes flamed so comically behind the glass of the window.

In those times, the putting to bed of the cats was one of the important—I had almost



said, primordial—operations of the house. They were not allowed, like so many other cats, to pass their nights wandering about in the foliage or the woods, in the contemplation of the stars and the moon. On such questions we had principles in regard to which we allowed no compromise.

The operation consisted in placing them in a granary at the bottom of the courtyard, in a shed of a house which stood apart, was very old, and hidden under the ivy, the vines, and the glycines. This happened to be in Sylvester's quarters and next his room ! Thus, every evening, all three took their departure together, the Moumouttes and he. When each day—days to which I paid no heed then, for which I have often wept since—when each day closed and was lost in the abyss of time, this servant, who had become almost a member of the family, was called, and mamma said, with a half-joking air, amused at the sacerdotal air with which these high functions were pre-



formed, "Sylvester, it is time to put your cats to bed."

At the very first words of the sentence, even though they were pronounced in a low tone of voice, White Moumoutte cocked her ear anxiously. Then, when she was convinced that she had heard aright, she jumped down from her chair, and, with an air at once important and agitated, she ran by herself to the door, in order to go in front, and to do so on foot, never allowing herself to be carried—wishing to enter into her bed-chamber of her own free-will or not at all.

The Chinese, on the contrary, schemed to avoid, if possible, leaving this cosy room; jumped down very quietly, crept along the floor very softly, and bent down so as to appear smaller, and, looking from the corner of her eye to see if she had escaped notice, hid herself under a piece of furniture. Big Sylvester, then, who had learned all these ways long ago, asked, with his boyish smile, "Where are you, Chinese?"

I know well enough you are not far away." Immediately she answered him with a purr, understanding that it was useless to make any further pretenses, then allowed herself to be taken up, and was carried out, seated very tenderly astride the broad shoulder of Sylvester.

The procession at last was ready to start: in front White Moumoutte, independent and proud; in the rear, Sylvester, who said, "Good-evening, sir, and ladies," and who, carrying in one hand his lantern to light the courtyard, held invariably in the other the long gray tail of the Chinese as it lay on his chest.

As a rule, White Moumoutte went with docility along the path that led to the granary. But sometimes, at certain phases of the moon, the spirit of vagabondage seized her, or she had a fancy to go to sleep at the angle of some roof or on the top of some solitary pear-tree, in the beautiful freshness of December, which was in contrast to the heat she had enjoyed all the day in a com-

fortable armchair. When this happened, Sylvester made his reappearance, with a comic face suitable to the occasion—still with his lantern in his hand, and with the tail of the docile Chinese, squatted against his neck. “White Moumoutte doesn’t want again to go to bed.” “What?” Aunt Claire would exclaim indignantly. “Ah! we shall see.” And, then, she would go out herself to try the effect of her authority, calling out “Moumoutte!” in her poor, dear voice, which I feel as if I heard still, and whose sound was taken up and prolonged, in the silence of the gardens and in sonorous echoes on a winter’s night. But no, White Moumoutte would not obey. From the top of a tree or of a wall she would content herself with looking down at us, cunningly seated, her fur making a white spot in the darkness, and her eyes shining like particles of phosphorus. “Moumoutte, Moumoutte! Ah, the wretched creature! It is a shame, miss—such conduct is really shameful.”

Then mamma went out in her turn, afraid of the effect of the bitter cold on Aunt Claire, and anxious to make her come in; then, a moment after, I followed to bring the other two in. And then, when we saw ourselves all gathered together in the courtyard on a frosty night—Sylvester among the rest, holding the Chinese by the tail—and all set at defiance by this Moumoutte perched up aloft, we could not help laughing at our own expense; the laugh beginning with Aunt Claire, and communicating itself at once to all of us. Indeed, I have always doubted that there were in the whole world two other old people—alas! they were very old—who had such a faculty for laughing frankly with young people, or who understood so well the art of being amiable, of being thoroughly gay. So much so that I have never had such fun with anybody as with them, and all about such insignificant things, an irresistibly comic side to which they would find out in a way of their own.

This Moumoutte was certainly determined to have the last word. We all re-entered, rather mystified, the small room, which had been chilled by the open doors, and went to our respective rooms by a series of stairs and of somber passages. And Aunt Claire, seized with a renewal of her anger, before she entered her own room, standing at her door exclaimed, as she bade me good-night: "All very well, but what have you to say for her—this cat?"

## XXI.

The existence of a cat can go on for twelve or fifteen years if no accident happen.

The two Moumouttes lived, still together, to brighten another delicious summer. They enjoyed once again their hours of ceaseless reverie in the company of Suleima (that eternal tortoise, whom the long succession of years had no power to age), between the cactus in bloom, and on

the stones of the courtyard, warmed by the hot sun. Or they sat alone on the top of the old wall, in the annual confusion of the honeysuckle and the white roses. They had several little ones, who had been brought up with tenderness and placed advantageously in the neighborhood. Even those of the Chinese had been easily disposed of and were much in request, because of the originality of their looks.

They also lived through another winter, and were able to enjoy once again their long sleeps at the corner of the fireplace, their profound meditations before the changing aspect of the braziers and the flames.

But this was the last season of their happiness; and immediately after, their sad decline began. In the following spring some indefinable maladies began to disorganize their two queer little persons, although they were still of an age to promise several years more of life.

Chinese Moumoutte, who was the first attacked, showed, in the first instance, symptoms of mental trouble, of black melancholy—regrets, perhaps, for her distant Mongolian home. Refusing to eat or drink, she made prolonged retreats to the top of the wall, remaining in the same place for whole days without moving, answering to our calls with piteous looks and plaintive little “miaous.”

White Moumoutte, also, in the first fine days, had begun to languish, and in April both were really ill.

Veterinary surgeons, who were called in for consultation, ordered seriously impossible things. For one, pills morning and evening, and poultices on the stomach; to shave them quite bare, and bathe them twice a day in plenty of water! Sylvester himself, who adored them, and could make them obey when nobody else could, declared that the thing was impossible. Then we applied for remedies to skillful old women; some “wise women” were called



in, and their prescriptions were adopted; but nothing came of it.

They were both going to leave us, our Moumouttes! We felt a deep pity for them; but neither the fine spring nor the beautiful sun, when it came back again, could drag them out of the torpor of death.

One morning when I came home after a journey to Paris, Sylvester said to me sadly, as he took my bag, "The Chinese is dead, sir."

For three days she had disappeared—she who had been so regular in her habits, and never left the house. Without doubt, feeling her end near, she had gone away for good, obeying that feeling of exquisite and supreme delicacy which impels certain animals to hide themselves in their dying hour. "She remained, sir, the whole week perched up there in the red jessamine, not even coming down to eat. She always, however, answered when we spoke to her, but in such a weak voice!"

Where, then, had she gone to pass her



last sad hour, poor Chinese Mounoutte? Perhaps, in her ignorance of everything, she had gone among strangers who would not allow her to pass her last hour in peace; who perhaps hunted her, tormented her; who perhaps threw her on to the dunghill! I should, indeed, have preferred to have heard that she had died in our home; my heart grew heavy as I thought of that queer human look of hers—so full of appeal, so full of that desire for affection which she had no power to express—which had sought my eyes with those same anxious questionings that she had never been able to put into words. Who knows what mysterious anguish may penetrate into the little confused souls of animals in their dying hour?

## XXII.

As if bad luck had fallen upon our cats, White Mounoutte also seemed to approach her end.

By one of the caprices which possess the

dying, she had chosen as her last home my dressing room, on a certain couch whose rose color had doubtless pleased her. We took her some food there—a little milk, which she barely touched. But, nevertheless, she gave us, when we entered, a look that showed she was pleased, and she even uttered a feeble purr when we stroked her as a caress.

Then, one fine morning, she disappeared also—clandestinely, as the Chinese had done—and we thought she would never return.

### XXIII.

She was to reappear, however, and I recollect how sad that reappearance was.

It was about three days after, in one of those periods of early June, which radiate and glow with the utter calm of the air—deceptive in their appearance of eternal duration, melancholy to those beings who are destined to die. Our courtyard put forth all its leaves, all its flowers, all its roses on

the walls, as it had done in so many Junes in the past. The martlets and the swallows, intoxicated by the light, wheeled with cries of joy in the deep blue sky. There was everywhere a festival of the things that have no life and of the volatile creatures that have no dread of death.

Aunt Claire, who was walking there, watching the growth of the flowers, called me suddenly, and her voice showed that something extraordinary had happened.

“Oh! come here and see; our poor Mounoutte has returned!”

And she was, in fact, there; come back again, like a sad phantom, with her coat already stained by earth, and half-dead. Who can tell what feeling had brought her back? Some reflection, perhaps; a failure of courage at the last hour, the craving to see us once again before she died.

With great difficulty she had crossed over the little wall so familiar to her, which once she had jumped over in two bounds when she returned from her police duties

on the outside and had slapped some tom-cat or corrected some tabby. Breathless from her severe struggles to return, she remained half-lying on the moss and the new grass at the side of the pool, trying to stoop down to get a mouthful of the fresh water. And her looks implored us, called us to her aid. "Do you not see, then, that I am about to die? Can you do nothing to prolong my existence a little?"

There were presages of death everywhere on this beautiful June morning, under this calm and superb sun. Aunt Claire, bent toward the dying cat, appeared to me, all of a sudden, so aged, weaker than ever before, ready also to soon depart.

We decided to take Moumoutte back into my dressing room, on the same rose-colored couch which she had chosen in the preceding week, and which had seemed to please her. And I promised to watch her, so as to prevent her from running away again—at least, until her bones found a resting-place in the ground of our court-

yard—and that she might not be thrown on some dunghill, as happened doubtless to that other one, my poor little companion from China, whose anxious look still pursued me. I took her into my arms, with extreme precautions, and, contrary to her usual custom, she allowed herself to be carried this time, completely confiding in me, with her drooping head supported on my arm.

On the rose-colored couch, soiling everything, she held out for some days still—for cats die hard. June continued to blaze through the house and in the gardens around us.

We often went to see her, and she always tried to raise herself, so as to do the honors of the place to us, her look grateful and moved, her eyes telling as plainly as could human eyes the existence inside her, and the anguish of what we call soul.

One morning I found her stiff, her eyes glassy, reduced to a dead creature, something to be thrown away. Then I ordered

Sylvester to dig a hole in a bend in the courtyard, at the foot of an arbutus tree. Where had that light which I had seen through the eyes of the dying cat gone to? What had become of that small unquiet flame from within?

## XXIV.

The burial of White Moumoutte in the quiet courtyard took place under the beautiful sky of June, in the full sunshine of two o'clock.

At the spot indicated Sylvester digs out the earth, then stops, looking into the bottom of the hole, and leans down to take out of it with his hand something which had surprised him.

"What is this?" he asked, shaking some small white bones which he had just perceived. "Is it a hare?"

It was the remains of an animal, certainly—those of my Senegal cat, a Moumoutte from the olden time, my companion in Africa, who had also been much loved,

whom I had buried there a dozen years ago, and then forgotten in the abyss in which are heaped up all the things and beings which have disappeared. And while I looked at these little bones mingled with earth, these little legs now mere white sticks, this collection which still gave an impression of the hind-quarters of an animal seen from behind, I suddenly remembered, with an inclination to smile and yet a slight oppression of the heart, a scene which I had forgotten entirely—a certain moment when I had seen the same skeleton of this cat's back—then provided with agile muscles and a silky coat—fly before me comically, and scamper off with its tail in the air, and frightened to death.

It was on a day when, with the obstinacy characteristic of the race, she had got up on a piece of furniture which had been forbidden to her twenty times, and had broken a vase there which I greatly valued. I first smacked her, and then, my anger not being yet exhausted, I had aimed at



her, as I followed her, a kick—which was rather brutal. She who had been slightly surprised by the smack, understood, from the kick which followed, that this was a case of a serious declaration of war. It was then that she had scampered off so quickly with all her limbs, her tail like a plume floating in the wind. Then, having taken refuge under a piece of furniture, she had turned round to give me a look of reproach and of distress, believing herself ruined, betrayed, murdered by him whom she loved, and into whose hands she had confided her lot. And as my eyes still retained their wicked expression, she had uttered her wild howl, that unique and sinister “miaou” of cats when they believe themselves about to be killed. All my anger suddenly disappeared; I called her, caressed her, calmed her on my knees, still frightened and panting. Ah! that last distressful cry of an animal, even though it be but that of a poor cow which they have just taken to the slaughterhouse, even



though it be but that of a poor rat which a bulldog holds between his teeth—that cry which no longer hopes for anything, which is addressed to nobody—which is like a last grand remonstrance to Nature herself, an appeal to some unconscious spirits of pity in the air!

Two or three bones buried at the foot of a tree—that was all that remained of those hindquarters of a Moumoutte whom I remember in the full of life, and so funny. And its flesh, its little person, its attachment to me, its great fright on a certain day, its cry of anguish and reproach—in short, all that was around those bones—has become a little earth.

When the hole was made to the proper depth, I went up for the Moumoutte which lay stiff up there on my rose-colored couch.

When I came down with the little burden, I found mamma and Aunt Claire in the courtyard, seated on a bench in the shadow, with an affectation of having come

there by accident, and of speaking of something or other. To meet expressly for this burial of a cat would have appeared, even to ourselves, rather ridiculous, would have made us smile in spite of ourselves.

Never was there a more dazzling June day, never a warmer silence, broken by such a gay buzzing of insects. The courtyard was all flowery, the rose trees covered in roses. The calm of a village, of the country, reigned in the gardens around; the swallows and the martins slept; only the everlasting tortoise Suleima, grown livelier as the heat increased, wandered lightly and promiscuously about on the old sunny stones. Everything was a prey to the melancholy of skies that were too tranquil, of weather too fair, and to the heaviness of the middle of the day. Amid so much fresh verdure, joyous and dazzling light, the two dresses of mamma and Aunt Claire, both alike, made two spots intensely black. Their heads, with their white glossy hair, were bent, as though

they were a little tired of having seen and reseen so often—so very often, almost eighty times—the treacherous renewal of all life. The plants, the things, seemed to sing cruelly the triumph of their perpetual renewal, without pity for the fragile beings who heard them, already saddened by the anticipation of their inevitable end.

I put Moumoutte at the bottom of the hole, and her coat, white and black, dissappeared immediately under some shovelfuls of earth. I was glad that I had succeeded in keeping her, and in preventing her from going to die elsewhere, as had the other one. At least, she would turn to dust among us, and in that courtyard where so long she had laid down the law to the cats of the neighborhood, where she had so often lounged in the summer on the old walls with their white roses; and where in the winter nights, at the hour when she would make her capricious choice of a bed, her name had resounded so often in the si-

lence as it was called aloud by the aged voice of Aunt Claire.

It seemed to me as if her death were the beginning of the end with the dwellers in the house. In my mind, this Moumoutte was linked, like a plaything that had been a long time in use, with those two well-beloved guardians of my fireside, seated there on that bench where she had so often kept them company while I was absent far away. My regret was less for the poor incomprehensible and faint little soul than for the period that had come to an end. It was as if it were ten years of our own life which we had just buried in the earth.

THE WORK AT PEN-BRON.



## THE WORK AT PEN-BRON.

I AM astonished at myself, at my giving my advocacy to this work, which is altogether out of my line, and which at first sight, besides, rather repelled me. I am astonished still more that I do it with a strong sense of conviction, with a real desire to be heard, to persuade, to carry other people away, as I have been carried away myself.

This autumn a highly respected admiral wrote to me and begged me to take an interest in the Pen-Bron hospital, the name of which I then heard for the first time. I confess that if the letter had not been signed by this excellent sailor's name I should have thrown it into the wastepaper basket. Good Heavens! just think of what I was asked to do, and for what purpose! *A hospital for scrofulous children—what*

had I to do with it of all men? Better let them die, these poor little things, than preserve them for a miserable life—and, perhaps, from children that would be a disgrace. We had, alas! quite enough already of weaklings and stragglers in our armies in France.

Out of respect, however, for him who had addressed himself to me, I answered that I would do my best, and most cordially. And I wrote, with some internal mistrust, to the founder of Pen-Bron, M. Pallu—whose name and address the admiral had given me—that I was at his service.

Two or three days afterward M. Pallu in person came from Nantes to see me.

At first his enthusiastic language did not move me. These little unhealthy beings, these scrofulous subjects of which he spoke, still gave me a vague sense of terror—a certain degree of pity, mingled, however, with an unsurmountable disgust. I listened to him with resignation. They



had brought him some of them, he told me, from the gutter, their limbs eaten up by horrible wounds. Some who were almost falling to pieces had been brought in little boxes; and he had sent them back, able to walk, at the end of a few months—had restored their bones, given them back some health and a certainty of life.

. At last, tired out, I interrupted him, a little brusquely, with the remark, "It would, perhaps, have been more humane to have allowed them to die."

With great calmness he replied that he was of the same opinion.

Then I began to see that here was a man with whom I should find something in common. This work had another side doubtless, which he would explain to me—a loftier scope than I had yet divined.

Little by little he told me things of which I had never heard before, things that frightened me—of the progress of this disease, the very name of which brings disgrace; of its more and more rapid in-

crease, in recent years especially; of the sufferings, the physical impoverishing, of the children in great cities; in fine, that at least a third of the blood of France was already vitiated.

Those cures which had been effected at Pen-Bron, on little beings who were supposed to be utterly lost, and who would remain pitiably weak, had to him only a value as experiments. They showed that this evil, whose name I dare not even write, was curable—thoroughly curable, in certain climates, by salt and by the sea. And then he told me his dream of extending his work, of making it something vast and universal, of attempting the renewal of the entire race.

“To-day,” he said, “in this hospital which we have founded with so much difficulty, and which can accommodate just one hundred children, we have only the refuse of the other hospitals in France—poor little morbid phenomena who have lived in beds for years, who have tired out all the

doctors, and who are brought to us *in extremis*, when there is no longer any hope for them. But if, instead of a hundred children, we could receive in Pen-Bron thousands and thousands, in rows of large buildings with miles of frontage all along this marvelous sandy peninsula, where the air is always warm and impregnated with salt—if in place of these poor little beings whose skin is pierced with deep holes, they brought us all those whom the malady has scarcely touched as yet, all those who are merely threatened—if they could send to us every year all the little weaklings and sickly things that grow up without air in the factories of great cities, and who become afterward scrofulous soldiers, whose children will be still more pitiful—if they could all come here at the age when the constitution can be easily strengthened—and if they asked from the sea a little of that strength which it gives to sailors and to fisherman——”

And as he unfolded his idea to me, as he

enlarged it to me with burning conviction, I saw rise into his eyes the look of an apostle. I understood that the work to which he had devoted his life was noble, French, humanitarian.

Then, almost won to his side, I promised that, before I tried to say anything about it (I have never been able to speak of anything that I have not seen with my own eyes), I would go myself to Pen-Bron, and see what he had already begun to do there—on those “marvelous sands,” as he called them.

. . . . .

Some weeks later, at the end of September, we were at Croisic, in the little port crowded with fishing boats. Before us the sea-water had that peculiarly intense blue which it always assumes in places where, under the influence of certain currents, it is partially salt and warm. And down there—just beyond the first blue shoals—there rises an old mansion with turrets which the gales have whitened, and which stands

alone in sands that look as if they formed a complete island. This is Pen-Bron. But never did a hospital look less like one. It was, indeed, difficult to realize that this gay building, open to all winds, could contain within it so many poor smitten beings—so many terrible and rare varieties of a horrible disease.

After a passage of a few minutes a boat brings us to the sands—which are not an inlet, as they appear in the distance, but are the end of a long, very long, and narrow peninsula—of a kind of endless beach inclosed between the ocean and some salt lagoons fed by the sea. Pen-Bron is there, surrounded with water like a ship. In front of its walls there is a rudimentary garden, which is swept by all the breezes of the open sea, but where, nevertheless, flowers grow in the sandy flower beds.

About sixty children are outside—boys and little girls, in two separate groups. The little boys play, talk, sing, under the superintendence of a good Sister in her

distinctive cap; and so do the little girls, with the exception of some who are taller, and who are seated on chairs and do needle work. And this is how it is, it seems, every day, except when it is raining heavily. Living constantly in the open air, the boarders of Pen-Bron move round the building, according to the direction of the wind and sun, looking at one time on the lagoon, at another on the open sea—always breathing that breeze what leaves a taste of salt on the lips. And really, if it were not that one sees some crutches bearing up poor weak little limbs, some bandages concealing half the face, and, leaning against the walls, three or four little chairs of a shape that is disquieting, you would imagine that you had come to an ordinary boarding school at the recreation hour. So much was this the case that I felt vanish suddenly that kind of physical horror, of unreasoning distress, which contracted my breast at the first sight of this museum of wretchedness.

I have now but a feeling of curiosity as I approach these little invalids. From afar I see them playing, just like any other children of their age. And yet they would not be here unless they had been attacked—every one of them, without exception—to the very marrow of their bones by some frightful disease. What kind of faces must they have, then?

*Mon Dieu*, faces just like anybody else—sometimes even, to my great surprise, faces that are very winning—round, full, imitating health. And how they are sun-burnt, actually scorched! They have on their cheeks the mark of the sea, just like fishermen. You might imagine that they had stolen from the children of sailors that appearance of having been tanned by the wind and the sun which make them look so strong. It is a complete surprise to find them looking thus.

When one comes closer, however, there are plenty of things to make one groan. Under the broad small trousers of the pat-



tern common in the country you see limbs that are odiously twisted—contorted and twisted thighs. Under the small waistcoat are hard corsets, which sustain weakened spines that otherwise would fall in; and then in the flesh there are large holes which are scarcely closed, hollow and horrible scars, and all kinds of mysterious phenomena of a very mournful order.

But laughing gayety is there all the same in almost every eye. You find confidence and hope have returned to these poor anæmic things, and they give you the impression of an unexpected return of life into their weak limbs.

M. Pallu, who accompanies me, calls them in turn, quite proud of being able to present them to me with their healthy, bronzed cheeks. And poor children! they show me their scars without shame—and each one tells me the story of his lamentable past. This one had an open wound in his side for six years, below the arm. The hole was always getting deeper, and the treatment in



the hospitals was doing no good. He had been in the Pen-Bron only four or five months, and it was all closed, all cured. Smiling, he opened his little shirt to show me the spot, where there then seemed nothing but a long scar, a little red. Another, about ten years old, had just spent four years in a hospital bed, stretched in a kind of box, with what is called Pott's disease, of which I had never heard before, but the very sound of which makes me cold. It is a disease of the spinal cord. The rings are not perfectly attached to one another, the ligatures are weakened, and thus the poor little body, if left to itself, would fall in like a Venetian lamp, which you take down and fold up. Well now the child who had this disease is standing erect before me; they have taken off within the last two or three days the corset which had supported his back when first he had gone out; he has no further need of it, and even his chest will be scarcely deformed.

They all have things of the same kind to

show me and to tell me, and this they do with a gay simplicity, with an air of absolute confidence in their easy and complete recovery. The splendid salt air of Pen-Bron cures all this sinister human decomposition, almost as surely as the warm winds dry up putrid sewers, the oozings and the moldiness on walls.

. . . . .

We now enter the hospital, which during the day is almost empty. It is an old building, was formerly a salt warehouse, and has now been transformed by M. Pallu. To carry this out, he must have had a strong will and tenacious purpose. The expenses have been almost entirely covered by subscriptions. But it was not without trouble, without vexations of all kinds, that one could succeed in raising one hundred thousand francs for such a work, which is not very inviting at first sight.

The hospital at Pen-Bron in its present state holds about one hundred beds—and these, children's beds scarcely larger than

cradles. The halls, all white, open on two sides to the sea. Just as if one were in a floating house, one sees through the windows nothing but broad marine expanses, great changing horizons, with fishing boats which sail past. And the simple chapel, with its oak roof, also resembles a chapel on board a vessel. The little invalids who have recently arrived, and who are not yet able to go out, instead of gazing on large gray walls, as in the ordinary hospital, amuse themselves by looking from their places on the passing boats, and receive even in their beds the splendid reviving air of the open sea. In contrast with boarders of a more ancient date, these newcomers have a pale complexion, the transparency of wax, and large hollow eyes.

But their stay inside the hospital is generally not very long; as quickly as possible, and at all risks, they send them out to breathe the salt air of the sea. They have even special boats on which they put them to bed—a kind of floating bed on which

they carry them on the lagoon. Through an open window they show me down below their poor singular little fleet, which is just starting out from the shore, towed by a barge. Three of these raft beds are occupied by pale children. In the barge is the chaplain who superintends them; he carries a book from which he reads to them during the long hours during the day when they have to lie at anchor.

Among those who cannot yet go out are several who are certainly very emaciated, very pale, more saddening to look upon than dead children. But they all receive me with a friendly smile; doubtless they have been instructed to do so. Before my arrival they have been told that I was someone devoted to their cause, and then in their ever active imaginations they have attributed to me, perhaps, some beneficent powers like those of a magician, and it seems to me that their long, kind looks compel me to do all that I can for their hospital. Here and there on the beds

there are playthings—very simple ones, I should add. For the girls there are dolls, or, rather, make-believe dolls, clothed in dressing gowns of printed calico. Here, a little boy of four or five years of age, who has his two legs in splints, with weights attached to the feet to prevent his crumbling bones from shrinking up, amuses himself by drawing up in line little paste-board soldiers which have been presented to him by the good sister. And then my eyes are arrested and charmed by the sight of a beautiful little creature of about twelve years of age, white and rosy, with features of a strange refinement, who plays at nothing, but who appears already to dream with a profound melancholy, her little head resting on its scrupulously clean and white pillow. I ask what is the matter with this little being, so very beautiful; they tell me it is that horrible Pott's disease at its last stage, and they fear it is too far gone to allow of its cure.

Her looks impress me strangely. They

are like an appeal, a sad supplication, a cry of despair, which knows everything, and which is infinite. And then, no word, no tears appeal to me like those prayers of anguish which at certain moments flash out, mute and brief, from the eyes of the disinherited of all classes—sick children, old men, the poor and the abandoned, or even beaten animals that tremble and suffer. Ah, that poor little thing! And just think that I am the man who had said that it were better to allow those children of Pen-Bron to die. It is in this vague and general manner that you say these things *before you have seen them with your own eyes*; but as soon as it comes home to you in the individual case, you feel immediately that this cannot be done; that it would be monstrous. And then, seeing it is possible to prevent it, by what right would you send to the mysterious unknown of death those little bright eyes, with such a look of intelligence—those little eyes, wistful and suppliant, which

have scarcely opened upon life! Even though the idea of developing this hospital so that it may become a work of national regeneration be an impracticable chimera, the task of bringing back to health a few little children such as those just seen is worth the trouble, a hundred times over, of continuing and increasing the work.

But the chimera is capable of realization—with money; ah, yes, with money, with much money. Behind the existing hospital there is this almost interminable peninsula of sand, which stretches out of sight like a yellowish ruby, between the blue waters of the sea and the still bluer waters of the salty lagoon. It is there, in this incomparable situation, that M. Pallu, the founder of Pen-Bron, dreams of extending over miles of frontage his rows of white beds, so that thousands of weakling children may come and acquire the swelling chests and the hard muscles of sailors.

Let nobody imagine for a moment that I have lent my influence by mistake to a



private and selfish speculation. Oh no; let there be no mistake on this point. He who has founded Pen-Bron has spent his money as well as his energy and his mind upon it. There is a managing committee which receives no pay—a committee composed of thoroughly good people, who, when there is any deficit in the accounts, make it up out of their own purses. There are doctors who are not paid, and who come there every day from Nantes, simply out of their benevolence. There are Sisters of Charity who are admirable. And here is a little point which will give you an idea of the character of the Mother Superior: For want of money, they do not burn the soiled linen; they wash it, so as to be able to use it again; and on the servant-women refusing to do this terrible work, this sister said, quite simply, “I will wash these things myself!” and she has washed them and she washes them every day, during the hours she has for rest. It



is just an entire community of people with good hearts, bound together by a common faith in the work they have begun, and sustained amid their terrible difficulties by the marvelous results they have already attained. They have built some hopes on me, and on what I could say to make them better known; and I tremble lest their hopes should be deceived, so deeply do I feel that their admirable work is one of those which at first sight are not attractive. They want money not only to undertake the great work of which they dream—the regeneration of all the children of France—but even to meet the most pressing cases of wretchedness. Every day, for want of room, they are obliged to close their doors to parents who come and beg admission for their children.

Oh, if my voice could only be heard! If only I could get them some subscriptions; or if I could only induce those who will not be convinced by me, to have the

curiosity during their excursions to the seaside to pay a visit to Pen-Bron ! I am sure that when they have seen they will be gained over to the cause, as I was ; and will subscribe.

IN THE DEAD PAST.



## IN THE DEAD PAST.

THE past—all the accumulation of what has gone before us—possesses my imagination almost without cessation. And often I have the desire—the only one that can never be realized, and that is impossible even to God—to go back, if it were only for a furtive moment, into the abyss of the days that have gone forever—into the auroral freshness of the more or less remote past.

By the partial exercise of my will, the half-illusion can come to me of such a return—especially at certain special hours, when, for instance, I penetrate into regions that have not changed for centuries, into dwellings that have remained intact; where skeletons, now scattered in Heaven knows what earth, once lived, thought, smiled. I experience it also when I find

by chance things which, while in themselves fragile and frail, have nevertheless preserved themselves miraculously a long time after the beings to whom they belong have disappeared into unrecognizable dust. Then I see again, with sufficient clearness, in my mind's eye, personages who have disappeared—some old, some delightfully young. But never do I succeed in reproducing them in the full light of day. The vague twilight in which they usually reappear to me belongs at once to the earliest morning and to the approaching night—to the strangely fresh hour of dawn or the expiring hours of evening.

My nearest ancestors—those of the beginning of this century or of the end of the last—those whose faces and smiles I have learned to know from their portraits, whose manners and habits, some of whose very phrases, have been repeated to me, and who, besides, lived a life very similar to ours, in the midst of well-known things—these I see sometimes, but always in the

spring evenings, in beautiful twilights, limpid and embalmed in jessamine.

I find infinite charm in this association which takes place in my mind in spite of me between the dead past and the evenings of May with their odor of flowers. I can explain it, besides, quite easily. First, the jасmin is an old-fashioned plant. The old walls in our family house in the Ile d'Oléron have been carpeted with it for two or three centuries. And, then, one evening, at the dawn of my life, when I returned from a walk in the twilight, intoxicated with the odors of the country, of the new hay, of the beautiful verdure that was everywhere appearing again, I found my grandmother and my grandaunt, Bertha, seated in the bottom of the courtyard, breathing the fresh air of the evening, in the twilight under the hanging branches, in which one could distinguish confusedly some white flowers; these were the everlasting jessamines. They were just talking of their two sisters, who had died by

accident very young—somewhere about 1820—and who used, it appeared, to remain out in this court in the spring evenings and sing duets to the accompaniment of their guitars. Then there came upon me a sudden impression of the past—the first really vivid one I had ever received since I had come into the world—seizing me so as almost to frighten me, and with a whole volume of sensations that appeared not to belong to me at all.

They had never before spoken in my presence of those two dead girls, and I approached, shuddering, to listen with a hungry terror to what they were saying about them. Ah! these duets which they sang—those voices of former days which vibrated in this same spot, and in just such May evenings. They are nothing but dust now—the lips, the throats, the cords that had given out those melodies in the same fresh tranquillity of the twilight. And how old they were also—those ancestresses of mine, the last who remembered these girls! I



put timid questions as to their appearance. What were their faces like? whom did they resemble? Already there rose up in my pathway the revolting mystery of the brutal annihilation of human beings, the blind continuation of families and races. Ever since, in the evenings of spring, under the cradle of jessamine, I have thought persistently of those two young girls—my unknown grand-aunts. And the association of ideas, of which I spoke just now, was thus created forever in my mind.

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Quite recently, on an evening in last May, I gazed from the window of my study on the beautiful light as it faded little by little over our quiet quarter on the houses around, that to me are so familiar. The swallows, the martins, after wheeling round and round with cries of ecstatic joy, had suddenly grown silent all together, as if at a signal from one leader, frightened, perhaps, by the growing shadows; one by one they sought their nests under the roofs, leav-

ing the meadows of the sky void—except for scarcely visible bats. A remnant of the rosy splendor still hovered over us, just touching the tops of the old roofs with light; then it rose and rose till it was lost in the profound depths of the sky. Real night was approaching.

An odor of jessamine suddenly reached me from the gardens around; and then I began to dream of the past, but of that past which has but lately gone; of that whose actors still retain their forms under the devouring earth and fill our cemeteries with their coffins almost intact; men who wore on their necks the crayats of many folds which were the fashion in 1830; women who arranged their hair in curl papers—those poor remains of grandfathers and grandmothers tenderly wept for and now almost forgotten. Doubtless, thanks to the immobility of small provincial towns, this quarter immediately under my eyes has scarcely changed since the past days, which

are filling my imagination. That house opposite has remained the same; it was there that one of my grandmothers formerly lived. And, with the assistance of the darkness, I *forced* myself to imagine that the present moment had not yet been born; and that the date of the actual day was sixty or eighty years ago. If the door of this house opposite were to open, and on its threshold were to appear that grandmother—whom I scarcely knew—still young and pretty, with leg-of-mutton sleeves, and a coiffure unknown to this generation; if other fair beings also, in the dress of the same period, were to walk out and people the streets with their faint shadows; ah! what a charm, what a melancholy delight it would be to see, if it were for but a moment, the same quarter in the twilight of the May of 1820 or 1830; to see the young ladies of that time in their out-of-date garments and with their old-fashioned airs and graces starting out for their

walk, or coming to the windows to catch the freshness of the evening air.

It happened that, on the following night, I saw in a dream all that I had brought before my imagination during that reverie. Nightfall was at hand, toward the closing days of the first quarter in this century, in the streets of my native town, which were scarcely changed, but in which there was a somber half-light. I was taking a walk with someone of my own generation; I could not tell distinctly who it was—it was an invisible being, a pure specter, as the companions of my dreams usually are—it was perhaps my niece, or, rather, Leo, at all events it was somebody who is in constant association with my ideas, and haunted, as I am, by visions of the past. And we looked with all our eyes in order not to lose anything of this moment, which we knew to be rare, unique, fleeting, incapable of returning—a moment in a buried epoch which had come to life by some magic

artifice. There was a feeling, too, that one could not count on the stability of anything there. Sometimes the images died out suddenly for just half a second, then reappeared, then died out once again. It was like some pale, shifting phantasmagoria, which an effort of will, very difficult to keep up, had succeeded in bringing to life to move across the dim canvas of a shadowy past. We hurried forward with some feverishness to see—to see the very utmost possible before there came the stroke of the magician's wand that would plunge everything once more into eternal night. We tarried before we started for our own quarter, in the hope of being able to recognize some member of our own family—some ancestor whom we might be able to recognize, or perhaps even mamma or Aunt Claire, still quite little children as they were, being brought back from their evening walk with the May flowers they had gathered in their hands. The passers-by also rushed in and out of the houses,

quickly closing the doors, as though they had grown unaccustomed to wander in the midst of streets and were a little distressed at finding themselves restored to real life. The women wore leg-of-mutton sleeves, combs *à la girafe*; bonnets so old-fashioned that in spite of our emotion and of our vague terror we could not but smile. A mournful breeze, at the corner of the streets especially, agitated, in the confused twilight, the petticoats, the little shawls, the odd-looking scarves of the women who passed by, giving them still more the appearance of phantoms. But in spite of this breeze, and in spite of this somber twilight, one could see that it was spring; the lime-trees were in flower, and on the old walls the jessamine smelt sweet. Quite close to us there passed a couple, still very young, two lovers, tenderly leaning on each other's arm, and with a something—I know not what—in their air which, being familiar to me, made me look at them with particular attention. “Ah!”

said my niece, in a tone half-tender, half-ironical, though without malice, "it is the old Dougas." The person at my side, who was indistinct at the start, had definitely resolved herself into my niece. I saw her now quite clearly at my side, walking very rapidly—almost running.

It was, indeed, the old Dougas ; that was the resemblance which I myself sought to recall. And we were both deeply stirred, not precisely because of them, but because of the simple fact that we had succeeded in recognizing someone in the multitude of furtive specters. That at once gave the charm of the most striking truth to this dive into the dead past, and that threw over this sight of buried events a melancholy still more indescribable.

Those old Dougas—the people of whom we were thinking least of all—under what an unexpected aspect did they reappear to us. Poor old grotesque beings whom we had known formerly in our quarter—who were already infirm and decrepit while we



were still children—old people of the kind that produce on children the impression of having always been the same. And these were really the people who passed along so briskly, looking like a pair of turtle-doves, in this gentle evening breeze—she positively young, with her head bent, her coal-black hair coquettishly arranged under a large hat of the fashion of the time ! They were not more absurd than others, not uglier, transfigured by the mere magic of youth, and with the air of enjoying as much as anybody could the fugitive hours of spring and of love. And to see them young and in love again thus—those old Dougas—gave me a still sadder sense of the fragility of these two things, love and youth, the only things which are worth living for.

. . . . .  
Another very somber impression of the past came to me during a recent visit to Corsica.

At Ajaccio, where I had just arrived,



and which I saw for the first time, some friends took me to see the house in which Napoleon the First was born. It was in the spring—it is always spring when these things happen to me—a spring warmer than ours, heavy under a clouded sky, with the scent of orange trees and some other plants that might almost have been African. I had felt but little interest beforehand in this house, no more than I do about any other of the scenes familiar to sightseers and guidebooks where people generally think themselves bound to go. It said to me nothing, and would cause me no emotion.

The spot, however, pleased me from the very first. You felt that in the district nothing could have changed since the childhood of this man, who had so upturned the world.

Above all, the house was intact; and from the moment I entered, helped by the evening hours and the silence, the past began to come forth to me out of the dark-

ness, evoked as it were by the smallest details; the track of feet on the steps of the stairs, the faded whitewash of the walls, the old iron scraper placed before the threshold on which muddy eighteenth-century boots had been rubbed. The past began to assume its spectral life in my attentive brain.

First, in the courtyard—that sad little courtyard, bare of grass and surrounded by high houses of very ancient date—I saw playing the strange child that afterward became the emperor.

The rooms into which I entered in the twilight were but dimly lighted through the shutters, which were everywhere closed as though to increase the sense of mystery. The furniture had an air of elegance, an odor of *bon ton*, in this large dwelling; it was clear that the owners of this house were people of substance according to the ideas of the time. And, then, the seal of the past was so deeply impressed everywhere, the smell of dust, the extreme de-

cay of this furniture of the days of Louis XV., or of Louis XVI., eaten by moths and worms, gave an impression of the absolute abandonment, the long immobility of a tomb, as if nobody had entered there since that time, nearly a hundred years ago, when its historic owners had passed from its doors. In the dining room, looking on the small and almost deserted street, there was their table, still set, with curious chairs of an ancient pattern ranged around; and little by little I succeeded in bringing before my imagination one of their family suppers—on a spring evening fearfully like this, with the same sounds of birds from under the roofs and the same scents in the air. They came to life again before my eyes, in the semi-darkness favorable to the dead, faces and dresses and all; pale Mme. Letitia seated in the midst of her somewhat strange-looking children, their enigmatic future already preoccupying her grave spirit. It is so near to us this epoch of theirs when one thinks of it; we are al-

ways so near each other in time's profound depths of endless successions.

Then my thoughts wandered from this mother of an emperor to my own; and suddenly—I cannot explain the origin of this feeling—I felt an extreme sadness in the darkness, something like the dizziness one feels on looking into an abyss, when I said to myself that this supper of the Bonapartes, which I had seen so clearly and so suddenly, had all passed more than half a century before there was any thought in the world of my own mother—of that mother who has been always the most precious and the most stable thing in life to me—to whose side I cling with some of the feeling of the child's tender confidence whenever dark terror seizes me of destruction and the void.

I don't know how to explain it; but I should prefer to believe that her beginnings of life started from a date more remote; that her gentle faith, which still gives me a sense of security, had its origin in a past

a little more remote ; at the same time, feeling the contradictory sentiment that her soul should have beyond death an existence without end ; and to think of a time very like ours, and yet in which she had not begun to exist, upsets me completely. I believe that it gives me a new sensation more poignant than ever of the nothingness of us both in the vast whirl of beings, in the infinitude of time.

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Attention is quickly tired as soon as it has been devoted too intently to any subject. During the rest of my visit to the house of the emperor I thought of other things—nothing of any importance, and nothing that interested me.

I saw nevertheless his modest room—his room as a young man—in which I was told he slept for the last time on his return from Egypt. It was quite striking in appearance, with all its small details, which were still preserved. In our old house in the Isle of Oléron I remember a similar one which

was formerly occupied by a Huguenot great-granddaughter, who was almost his contemporary.

But for me the soul and the terror of the place are in the room of Mme. Letitia, a pale portrait of whom, placed in a dark spot I did not at first see, but which arrested me just as I was leaving with a sudden sense of fright. In an oval that had lost its gilt, under a moldy glass, it stands, a discolored pastel, the head pale against a black background. She is like him: she has the same imperious eyes, and the same smooth hair with the same smoothly lying locks. Her expression, surprisingly intense, has in it something sad, wild, suppliant. She appears a prey to the anguish of no longer being. The face, how I know not, has not remained in the center of the frame; it is as a face of a dead person who, frightened at finding herself there in the midst of night, has placed her face furtively in an obscure corner in this oval for

the purpose of seeing through the mist of the dim glass what the living are doing. And what has become of all the glory of her son? Poor woman! At the side of his portrait on the worm-eaten chest-of-drawers in his old room, there is under a globe a "Crib of Bethlehem," with the figures in ivory, which looks like a child's toy. It was probably her son who brought this back to her from one of his journeys. It would be very curious to know how they were to each other—what degree of tenderness they showed to each other; he, intoxicated with glory; she always anxious, severe, sad, foreboding.

Poor woman! she has passed into dark night; and even the fading splendor of the emperor scarcely suffices to keep his name in some men's memories. And in spite of his efforts to immortalize himself like the old legendary heroes, his mother in less than a century is forgotten. To save her from oblivion there remains but two or three portraits, scattered and neglected like this



one, which is already half-faded out. And our mothers—the mothers of us who are unknown—who will remember them? Who will preserve their loved images when we are no longer here?

Face to face with this pastel, in the opposite angle of this same room, another small sad thing attracts my attention in spite of the growing darkness: it is a simple frame in wood, containing a yellow photograph attached to the wall. It represents, still a little child in short trousers, that young Prince Imperial who was killed in Africa about a dozen years ago. A curious fancy, yet a touching one, of the ex-Empress Eugenie to place here this souvenir of her son, the last of the Napoleons, in the same room where was born that other one who shook the world!

. . . . .

I think of how striking and strange it will be to our children a century or two hence to pass in review the photographs of their ancestors or of dead children. How-



ever expressive be those portraits, whether printed or painted, which our ancestors have bequeathed to us, they cannot produce on us anything like the same impression. But photographs, which are direct reflections from ourselves, which fix even fugitive attitudes, gestures, momentary expression, how curious and how almost terrifying they will be to those generations which will come after us when we also have descended into the dead past.



SOME FISHERMEN'S WIDOWS.



## SOME FISHERMEN'S WIDOWS.

During the recent fishing season two boats belonging to Paimpol, the *Petite-Jeanne* and the *Cathérine*, were lost with all their crews and freight in the sea off Iceland. By this one disaster thirty widows and eighty orphans were added to the list on the Breton Coast. M. Pierre Loti then made an appeal to the charity of the public. A subscription, which was immediately opened, brought in about thirty thousand francs, which were distributed among the bereaved families. In the pages that follow the account is given of the work of distribution.—*Note by the Publisher.*

THE scene is at Paimpol, one September morning, in the usual Breton weather—somber and rainy. The first emotion I experienced was poignant enough when, at the hour agreed upon, I entered the house of the Naval Commissary, where were assembled the families of the sailors who had been lost. The corridor and the vestibule were filled with widows, aged mothers, women in mourning; black gowns, white caps, from under which

tears were flowing. All silent and huddled together there because of the rain outside, they awaited my appearance.

In the office of the Commissary were met, on his invitation, the Mayors of Ploubazlanec, of Plouëzec, and of Kerity (the three Communes where the suffering was greatest). They came to assist as witnesses at the distribution, and to supply information with regard to the character of the widows to whom sums comparatively large were about to be given. I had feared that among so many there would be some who were not quite reliable, who might be extravagant in this country which reeks of alcohol. But I was wrong. Ah! These poor women, they did not require the good character given to them in every case by the Mayors; their honest faces told their own tale. And they were all so clean, so neat, so nicely dressed with their humble black clothes and their caps freshly ironed.

We began with the widows of the crew of the *Petite-Jeanne*.

They answered one after the other to their names, and came to take the money, some with sobs, others with quiet tears, and some finally with a little sad and embarrassed salutation to us. When they retired, thanking everybody, the Mayor had the kindness to say to them, pointing to me, "It is to him—it is to Nostre Loti (in French, Monsieur Loti) that you should give your thanks." Then some put out their hands to touch mine; all gave me an ever-to-be-remembered look of gratitude.

There were some among them who had never seen a note for a thousand francs, and who turned this little blue symbol over and over again in their hands with an air almost of fright. The value of this piece of paper was explained to them in the Breton tongue. "You must be economical," explained the Mayor to them, "and keep that for the children." They replied, "I will

invest it, good sir;" or, "I will buy a piece of a field—I will buy some sheep—I will buy a cow?" and then they went away, weeping.

When the sorrowful work of distribution to the widows of the *Petite-Jeanne* was finished, that of the *Cathérine* began, with an incident which was very touching.

This *Cathérine*, you must know, had a mysterious fate, like that formerly told of the *Léopoldine*; nobody had ever met it in Iceland; it must have foundered before ever it got there; and, then, nobody had seen or ever heard anything of its wreck. But it was now six months since anything had been heard of it, and that was sufficient to allow us to assume that it was certainly lost. Nevertheless, some widows, it appeared, still hoped against all probability. I had no doubts myself; but on the previous evening, acting on the opinion of the owner of the ship, the Naval Commissary and myself had decided that, in the absence



of proofs, we should wait some weeks yet before distributing the money to these families of the *Cathérine*. The widows had been informed that they would be called this morning to be told only the sums that were designed for them, and that they would not receive them until October, and then only in case no good news came by that time with regard to the fate of the vessel. But M. de Nouel, Mayor of Ploubazlanec, had come to tell us during our meeting, that some of the fishermen belonging to his Commune, who had returned from Iceland, had seen a piece of what was undoubtedly the wreck of the *Cathérine*; our hesitations naturally fell to the ground; there was nothing further to be expected, and we could pay immediately.

The first widows who were called—two young women, who presented themselves together—thought that they were only going to be informed of the amount of their money. When they saw that they were to be paid immediately, they, like their sisters

of the *Petite-Jeanne*, looked at each other with eyes that questioned; at the same moment, a frightful look of anguish crossed their faces, and then there came an unexpected outburst of sobs which was caught up even as far as the vestibule, where the others were. The unfortunate creatures had not yet given way to complete despair. They had already begun to wear mourning, but they persisted in hoping against hope; and now, when the money was put in their hands, it seemed to them that everything was made more hopeless, more irrevocable; that it was the lives of their husbands which were being paid to them. I had without thinking, by my tactlessness, inflicted on them a cruel blow.

When all those of the *Cathérine* had taken their departure, about ten other women, in their poor black gowns, who had been summoned, still waited at the door. Here I am compelled to confess that I went beyond my powers. But how difficult it was not to do

so ; and who will find fault with me for it ?

During the preceding evening some women in mourning had come to the hotel where I was staying to call on me, and had said to me humbly, without recrimination and without jealousy, "I also have lost my husband in Iceland this year ; he fell into the sea" ; or, "he was carried away from his ship by a wave ; and I also have little children." I should have said to them, "I am exceedingly sorry, but you do not belong to the *Petite-Jeanne* or the *Cathérine*. Now I have assistance only for them ; I cannot recognize you."

It ended by my feeling this inequality to be unjust and unnatural. I ask pardon of my subscribers, but after refusing at first, I took it upon myself to make these poor people share in the distribution. I decided to give a part of the subscription—a lesser part it must be said—to the other women of the district of Paimpol whose husbands had been lost in the course of this

year, and I begged the Commissary of the Naval Recruiting Department—who approved of my decision—to begin again the complicated calculation of the amounts to be distributed to each person.

Alas! in this country of the Icelanders there remain many widows still to whom I can give no assistance; widows from last year, widows from two years ago, from three years ago—all in great poverty and burdened with very young children. To them I have been obliged to turn a deaf ear; one must stop somewhere—draw the line at some point.

It was painful to me not to be able to do something for these afflictions of older date. I have suffered still more from the thought of my inability to console those who are going to suffer in the coming fishing seasons, for I can never venture to address another appeal to my unknown friends.

After such reflections I understood better the half-protest, so courteous in its terms, which had been sent to me by the ship-

owners of Paimpol when I started the subscription. They were almost frightened to see the money so soon reach the widows of the *Petite-Jeanne* when other women of the same district, living next door to them, having had the same losses through shipwreck, would have to remain in their deep distress. They had urgently requested me to ask the permission of the subscribers to place the funds at the disposal of the "Courcy Society," and I had been on the point of doing so.

But, then, if I had done so, I should have immediately stopped the flow of charity which had been coming in with such spontaneity. We are like this: there must be some special case of misfortune brought under our very eyes in an especial manner to open our hearts. Charitable associations organized for a general purpose speak to us but little—hardly touch us at all. And so I had to let things go, as we say in the Navy.

At this moment and for the future I am

entirely devoted to the Courcy Society, the very existence of which I did not know of two months ago. If I can contribute to making it a little better known I shall be very glad.

There is a charitable man—M. de Courcy\*—who has devoted himself heart and soul to the widows and little orphans of the sea. In seven years he has gathered and placed about eight hundred thousand francs as a charitable fund for the families of all shipwrecked French sailors. There is not a fishing village where his name is not known and blessed.

The help which the Society sends has this advantage over those started by individual initiative, that it is always given in the proportion in which it is needed, so as to excite no feeling of jealousy among the families whom misfortune has overtaken.

But this assistance is unfortunately very

\* The office of the Society for the Assistance of the Families of the Shipwrecked, founded by M. de Courcy, is at 87, Rue de Richelieu, Paris.

much smaller than that which I have been sufficiently fortunate to bring to Paimpol to-day. It is insufficient everywhere and often; for the activity of the Society extends without distinction along all our coast, from the Mediterranean to the Channel, and, alas! the sailors who lose their lives every year are numerous. M. de Courcy then ought to have many legacies, many donations, and I would that I could speak of his work such touching words as would bring him some.

. . . . .

Thanks to the information collected with so much care by the Naval Commissary, we have been able to calculate the shares of the different claimants with tolerable equity, taking into account the sums already given by M. de Courcy, and taking also into especial consideration the number of children in each family (including the babies that were expected, who were numerous).

I have also thought it our duty to give



assistance to aged parents who had lost their breadwinner in their son.

Those who knew how to write a little signed opposite their names on the lists which we had prepared. For those who could not write (they were the more numerous) the mayors who were present signed as witnesses.

At Pors-Even and at Ploubazlanec, where I went in the evening at the close of the distribution to see some fishermen who were old friends of mine, I received many shakes of the hand, many thanks, many blessings. I wish I had the power to transmit to the subscribers some of all this—it was so frank, simple, and so good.

On the Tuesday following I left this district quietly in a coupé on the Saint-Brieuc diligence, thinking that it was all over.

About two o'clock we were to pass Plouëzec, the most afflicted commune, that of the sailors of the *Petite-Jeanne*.



At first I looked from afar at this village, with its houses of granite, its chapel, and its gray spire, thinking of all there was of sorrow and misery within its narrow limits.

As I got closer I was surprised to see many people stationed along the road—crowds, as if for a fair; but, unlike them, silent and motionless; the majority women and children.

“I believe it is for you. They are waiting for you,” said an Iceland friend to me, who was traveling at my side in this carriage.

And it turned out to be for me; I understood that soon. They had learned the hour at which I was going to pass, and they wished to see me.

When the courier stopped before the post-office the mayor advanced, raising with his two hands a little child of six to seven years, who had some business to transact with me—a very beautiful little child, with large dark eyes and hair that was silky and of the color of yellow straw. She

had to offer me a beautiful bouquet, and to address to me this compliment (over which she got mixed a little, which made her weep): "I thank you because you have kept the little children of Plouëzec from being hungry."

They were drawn up in a line on the two sides of the road, these "little children of Plouëzec"; and in the first row behind them I recognized the widows of yesterday, whose eyes were filled with tears as they looked at me. Behind them were almost the whole population of the village, and some strangers—bathers, doubtless, or tourists.

It was not a noisy crowd; there was no ovation with outbursts of applause—it was much better and more than that; it was just a few groups of people, poor for the most part, who, touched, grateful, motionless, looked at me without saying anything.

The courier set out once more, and I bowed along the whole street to the people, striving to maintain the ordinary expression

of my face, for a man looks very absurd when he weeps.

. . . . .

I have already in the name of those widows and those orphans thanked the subscribers who have responded to my appeal. - I have to thank them also for myself, because of this moment of sweet emotion which I owe to them.



AUNT CLAIRE LEAVES US.



## AUNT CLAIRE LEAVES US.

*Ah! Insensé, que crois que tu n'es pas moi.*

—V. HUGO: “Les Contemplations.”

SUNDAY, November 30, 1890.—Yesterday evening the sad boundary was passed; the precise moment in which one understands suddenly that death has come, is gone.

Those who have passed through the sorrow know well that decisive conversation with the doctor, and how one fixes on him one's eyes, almost threatening in their excitedness, while he speaks. His answers, at first obstinately vague, and then more and more heart-breaking as you press him, are understood gradually, enveloping you with successive chills which penetrate deeper with every moment, until the moment comes when you bow your head,

having finally grasped it all. One is almost moved to cry out to him for mercy, as if it depended on him, and at the same time one almost hates him because he can do nothing.

So, then, she is going to die—Aunt Claire.

And when one does know it, a certain length of time is necessary to survey all the aspects of what is going to happen—even to understand why it is that there is something so frightfully *final* in death.

The first night, then, arrives of that certainty with the momentary oblivion that comes with sleep, and then you must go through the anguish of waking to find that black thought seated more closely than ever by your side.

And so it is all over; Aunt Claire is going to die.

MONDAY, December 1.—This is a day of severe frost. A sad winter sun shines



white in a pale-blue sky—more sinister than if gray.

This day is passed in expecting the death of Aunt Claire. She lies on a low bed in the middle of her room where she had been laid just for a moment, and where she asked to be left without moving her again.

It is her old room of former days, where I used to love to remain whole days long when I was a child; many of my first strange little dreams of the great and unknown universe are associated with some of the things around—with the window frames, the ancient water colors on the walls; above all they are entangled with the cloudy patterns on the marble of the chimney-piece which I used to closely study in the winter evenings, discovering there all kinds of shapes of animals or things when the twilight hour brought me close to the fire. Nothing is changed in this chimney-piece where Aunt Claire formerly used to place for me *L'Ours aux*

*pralines*; and I see still in the same places the table on which she assisted me to place my magic tricks, the large chest of drawers which I used to burden with my play of the *Peau d'Ane*, with my fantastic decorations and with my little actors in porcelain. All my childhood, whether anxious or happy—all the opening impressions of my mind, whether disquieted or dazzled by mirages—I find again to-day with a melancholy as from beyond the tomb in this room where formerly I was so much petted, consoled, spoiled by her who is going to die there. Ah! that is the end of everything. Alas! for the nothingness which beckons to us all, and where we shall all be to-morrow.

. . . . .

There is nothing more to be done; and we remain near her bed.

During those hours of dumb expectancy, in which the spirit sometimes falls asleep and forgets—in which one sees nothing but the poor pale face, already almost

without thought, of her who is yet Aunt Claire—the good old aunt so deeply loved—my eyes catch sight of the cushions which hold her up. This one, with patterns a little faded, was embroidered by her formerly as a surprise, I remember, for New Year's Day—at the period when the approach of the New Year presents transported me with such childish joy twenty-five or thirty years ago. Ah! what a time is that of youth! Oh! that one could return there for but one hour! Oh! that one might retrace one's steps across the times that have been, or if only one could tarry a little by the way and not rush on so fast to death!

There is nothing to be done; we remain near her, and from time to time the newcomers of the family—the very little ones who will grow old so soon—arrive also, led by the hand or in their nurses' arms—a little frightened without knowing how much cause there is for terror, and with their eyes opened anxiously. They scarcely remem-

ber her who is passing away. Without, it is freezing bitterly under this pale hyperborean sky. And my beloved old mother, sitting motionless in the same chair opposite her dying sister, continues to watch that poor face which is breaking up and passing to annihilation, will not turn away her eyes from that companion of all her life, who is the first to return to earth. And I hear her whisper quite low, with an accent of sweet and sublime pity, "How long! How long!" This thing, which she does not name and which we all know, is the last agony. She feels that it is very long for her sister and that no suffering is spared her. But she speaks of it as of a passage toward an elsewhere, radiant and very assured; she speaks of it with that tranquil faith which I venerate—which is the one thing in the world that gives me at certain hours an unreasoning hope that is still somewhat sweet.

. . . . .

This terrible cold weather, so unusual in

our region, continues, adding to the sadness of the expectation of death a general sinister impression as of a cosmic trouble—as of the freezing up of the whole earth.

Toward three in the afternoon, in the frozen house, I was wandering about the rooms without object, merely for the purpose of changing from one place to another, without knowing what to do and my mind absent for a little while. I had almost *forgotten*, as happens when the most sorrowful expectation is prolonged indefinitely; and I reached quite accidentally the linen-room at the top of the house, whence one can see the country for a long distance through the window panes dimmed by the foggy frost—the country level and somber under the red sun of a winter evening.

. . . . .

On one of the shutters outside the window my eyes caught sight of two blades of rose-bay in a poor little broken bottle, which hung by a string from a nail, and suddenly I remembered it all with a pang

of grief. It was just about two months ago, during the beautiful autumn, which was so luminous and warm that Aunt Claire, passing accidentally at the same time as I through this linen-room, said to me, pointing this out to me, "Those are some cuttings of rose-bay that I am making." I do not know why, but at the first moment I was rather saddened. This idea of making cuttings when it would have been so much more simple to buy rose-bays all grown, appeared to me like a bit of senile folly. But then my thoughts went back with a deep sense of tenderness to those past days—to that time at which we were so poor, and at which the energy, order, and thrift of mamma and Aunt Claire were able to give a good appearance to our house; to that time when, as ever afterward, it was Aunt Claire who had the supreme direction of our trees and our flowers; for it was she herself who made the cuttings and who attended to the buds, to the sowing in the spring, and always found the means,

at an infinitesimal expense, of making our courtyard flowery and beautiful. To have been poor is really an exquisite experience. I blessed that unexpected poverty, which came to us one fine day just at the close of my too happy infancy, and remained with us for more than ten years. It drew closer together the bonds between us; it made me adore the more the two dear guardians of my fireside. It has given me priceless memories; it has thrown much charm over my life. I cannot tell all that it has brought me and all that I owe to it, all of which is certainly wanting to those who have never known poverty; to them one of the most beautiful sides of this world remains unknown.

These plants, which we buy nowadays at the nurseries, are to me impersonal—just the same as any others—I know them not, when they die I care not; but those which were sown or grafted by Aunt Claire, ah! how I wished that this unaccustomed cold should not kill them. Terror suddenly



seized hold of me at the thought; it would be one sorrow the more. I will at once tell the servants to take care of all those which are in the pots, to keep them at the right temperature; to watch over them with greater care than ever.

Then I look closer through the windows at these two blades of rose-bay shaken by the deadly north wind. They are already frozen, and the frost has broken the bottle in which they are suspended. Nobody will ever plant it again or make it revive, this poor little slip left by Aunt Claire. It makes me cruelly miserable to look at it, and sobs suddenly come to me—the first since I have learned that she is going to die.

Then I open the window; I take up piously the frozen slip, the remains of the bottle, the string to which it is attached, and I inclose all in a box, writing on the cover what it had all been, with the mournful date. Who can tell into whose hands will fall this absurd little relic when



I also shall have returned to earth? Everywhere there is this eternal irony. To love with all one's heart faces and things which each day, each hour, helps to destroy, to weaken, to bring to decay; and, after struggling with anguish to retain some little portion of all that is passing away, to pass away in one's turn!

In the evening Aunt Claire breathes and speaks still, recognizes us, answers our questions, but in a dull monotonous voice without inflections; it is not her old voice; she has already half descended into the abyss.

I have to mount guard at the sailors' barracks, and have accordingly to go back there for the night. Leo, who has come to take me there through the dark and icy streets, says to me *en route*, during our silent walk, only this little phrase, so simple in itself, so commonplace from its very simplicity, and, nevertheless, expressing pages of that kind of regret for my distant past which I experience at this moment—

words, besides, which sound the funeral knell of all the auroral epoch in my life, "She will no longer attend to your exercises or your impositions; poor Aunt Claire, she will no longer take part in your performance of the *Peau d'Ane*."

. . . . .

I pass my night of guard without sleep in these barracks. Outside there is still the heavy frost and the persistent cold under a clear and dry sky. At break of day I send my orderly for news. A word written in pencil tells me that nothing is changed; Aunt Claire still lives.

At the barracks, also, where I have to remain all day, there is something else which adds its tiny sadness to my great grief. In consequence of an order from the Ministry reducing our Division, they take down some rooms where the Marines had lodged since Louis XIV., among them the old fencing-hall, which I loved, because I had taken there my first lessons in arms, and because I had there for years taught

myself all the sailor's sports. Pell-mell are thrown on the frozen ground the bundles of foils, the sticks and the boxing-gloves, the old escutcheons and the old trophies. And I feel almost that a portion of my youth is being scattered with them over the ground.

About four o'clock in the afternoon, after taking a turn at work in the open air in the courtyards, I re-enter this poor room of the officer on guard which I have to occupy until the following morning, and I see on the ugly and sad yellow curtains of the bed a poor butterfly, which flaps its wings as if about to die—a large butterfly of the flowers of summer, a “Vanesse,” whose existence in December, after all this excessive cold, unusual in our country, has in it something abnormal and inexplicable. I approach and look at it. It is pierced right to its head by a large pin, which has been run into its poor little torn body. It is my orderly who has done this, with the same want of pity which is shown by chil-

dren. A flutter of painful agony agitates its poor wings, which are still fresh. In certain peculiar states of the mind, in moments of anxiety and despair, very insignificant little things are exaggerated ; reveal their unfathomable depths, cause you pain, and bring tears. Thus it is that the sight of the agony of this last butterfly of the summer on a wintry and frosty evening, under the dying hours of a wan and rose-colored setting sun, appears to me a thing infinitely melancholy, and is associated in my mind in a mysterious manner with the other agony which is close at hand. And tears, the tears that are the more bitter because they are shed in solitude, dim my eyes.

Ah ! that beautiful past summer, of which this butterfly is the last survivor. With what tightening of the heartstrings I saw it disappear ! I felt it finish little by little in the midst of plants that grew yellow, in the midst of our vines and roses shedding their leaves. I had so clear a presentiment

that it was the last of those in which it would be given to me to see once more pass together the two dear black dresses, alike in shape, amid the flowers of our courtyard and in the green avenue.

There was nothing to be done for this butterfly. It was doubly killed by the cold and by this hole which went through its body. I cannot do better than hasten its end. I catch hold of it, causing it as little pain as possible, and I throw it into the fire, where it was instantaneously burned, its soul passing away in imperceptible smoke.

Another night on guard at the barracks, through which I believe I hear every moment steps on the stairs—somebody coming from the house to tell me that death has done its work.

WEDNESDAY, December 3.—This morning I finish my week of duty. There is

still this weather of severe frost with a wan sun.

In this room of Aunt Claire, where for three days it seems to me one can feel physically the approach of death, things retain their same aspect of expectancy, and mamma is in the same chair beside her, looking at her as she takes her flight on this little iron bed from which she no longer wishes to be moved. Very low, in full view of everyone, and almost in the midst of the room, Aunt Claire is lying, complains, is agitated, and suffers. She looks like herself less and less, growing disfigured. The locks of her white hair, which used to be arranged so carefully, are now all in disorder. Her face changes and becomes effaced under her eyes, even before the end. Then she scarcely recognizes, and is no longer able to speak even with that dull voice which had not appeared to belong to her. All around, nevertheless, her room has preserved its accustomed aspect, with the same little objects in the same places

as in the days of my childhood, and when I try to imagine that this poor remnant, already scarcely recognizable, condemned beyond hope, is the Aunt Claire of former days, I have a rush of sorrow which is like the fall of wintry night on my life, and brings besides a disquieting feeling that I have never been able to let her know how much I loved her.

. . . . .

The doctor declares this evening that she cannot pass through the night, and that there is nothing more to be attempted, to be hoped. Nevertheless a little suffering can be prevented by the use of morphia. On this little chance bed she is in the grip of annihilation; she is about to finish that life, without joy even in the hours of her youth, which was always humble and self-effaced—sacrificed to us all.

In the old house, in the rooms, on the staircase, there prevails during this night a cold which penetrates to our bones—which grasps the mind and holds it clutched in



the single thought of death. One might imagine that the sun was departing from us for ever, just like life; and those plants which Aunt Claire cared for so many years in our courtyard are also doubtless about to die.

About ten o'clock, mamma, after having kissed the poor invalid, is persuaded to leave her, and to go and take some rest in a distant room where she might find more silence. She allows herself to be led away by her faithful *Mélanie*—one of a race of old and faithful servants who have become almost members of the family. Before she goes away, however, she has prepared with that tranquil courage, that love of order which ruled her whole life, those white things which are necessary for the last toilet. I, who never saw anybody die except in the distance, without preparations, in ambulances, or on ships, am astonished and chilled by these thousand little details which are altogether unfamiliar to me.

A consultation is held in a low voice as



to this last night's watch. It is agreed that for this night the servants shall be allowed to sleep, and that the nieces shall keep the vigil together. I go to bed close by in the Arab room, and I am to be roused up when the moment of the last agony comes. They are not to knock at my door for fear that mamma below should hear and understand in the silence of the night. No, they are to knock at a certain point in the wall which is near my head, and just at that point where Aunt Claire formerly tapped with her cane in the early morning at the time, marked with constant accuracy by a great clock, when I had some little work to do in the early morning, or some journey to make. I used to trust much more to her than to my sleepy servant, and she accepted cheerfully this task; just as formerly she had that of dressing the nymphs and the fairies in the *Peau d'Ane*, or of reciting to me the *Iliad*, or any of the other tasks which my fertile fancy conveyed to her.

. . . . .

THURSDAY, December 4.—On this same night, toward two o'clock in the morning, after some moments of that peculiar sleep which one has when some sorrow lies in wait, the expectancy of some misfortune or of death, I wake up shivering with a kind of frozen terror. They have knocked behind this wall which, on this side, resembles that of some distant white mosque and makes the spirit wander, but which on the other side looks down upon the alcove of Aunt Claire. I understood almost before I had heard. I understood with the same terror as if death itself with its bony finger had struck this little place in the alcove.

I jump up in haste, my teeth chattering from the cold of this icy night, and run to where I am called.

. . . . .

Yes; it is the end, the somber struggle of the final hour. It lasts but a few seconds. Still but half awake, I see it all as if in a painful nightmare. Then comes the soft immobility, and supreme tran-

quillity. Oh! the horror of that moment; the terror inspired by that poor head, so venerated and so loved, which falls back on its pillow forever!

Now the most painful things have to be done; the most terrible tasks accomplished. Those who were present resolve to do these things themselves, without waiting for the presence of the servants, or even their assistance. I retire until this is completed, in the icy anteroom, penetrated by a deadly sense of cold which is not altogether physical, but which also penetrates down to my soul's depths. . . . In this anteroom of Aunt Claire there were those familiar objects which I have known all my life, but which at this moment I can no longer look at; they dim my eyes with tears. . . . There is a particular little desk of hers, some small books and a Bible there on an old table. Above all others, in a corner there is her own little chair as a child, brought thither from the "Isle," preserved for seventy or seventy-five years,

and in which when I was quite a child I used to sit down near her, trying to imagine that remote epoch, almost legendary and miraculous in my young eyes, in which, in this Isle of Oléron, Aunt Claire herself had been a little girl.

When the last toilet is finished I am called back. Then we lift the poor body, now calm and in white garments, and raise it from the small, terrible bed of suffering, which in spite of everything we could do had assumed the look of a pallet, and placed her on a large bed, white and stainless.

Then we begin through the black and frozen house a curious rushing backward and forward, not waking the servants, and noiseless so that mamma may hear nothing. We take away bit by bit the bed of death, all the somber things which have no longer any use, carting these things down ourselves to the farthest point of the house, and passing twenty times to and from the courtyard, in which a wintry rain, colder

than real snow, begins to fall. This is about three o'clock in the morning. We look as though we were doing something clandestine and criminal. We perform tasks of which we had no idea until this night, astonished at being able to do them without more pain and disgust, and sustained by a kind of delicacy as regards the servants—by a kind of pious sentiment which extends itself even to trifles.

Returned at last to the side of the bed where we had laid her, we took away with anxious fear that mournful bandage which in the first moments is placed on the faces of the dead, and her face reappears—immobile, with an expression already more peaceful, no longer in the least painful to look at.

They now begin to dress Aunt Claire, to fix for the last time those venerable locks of which she had been so careful during her life. And as soon as this toilet is finished, the white hair framing the pale forehead, there is a transformation complete

and astonishing. The dear face, which for so many days I have seen contracted by physical pain, has become completely transfigured. Aunt Claire has assumed an expression of supreme peace, a tranquil air of distinction, with a vague smile which is very beautiful, an air of soaring above all things and above us. It is soothing and consoling to see her thus in this garment white as snow—in the majesty that has suddenly come to her—after all the horrors of that little bed on which she had chosen to lie, waiting for death.

Still noiseless, ascending and descending like phantoms, we look everywhere for whatever flowers can be found in the house during this frosty weather; for bouquets of white chrysanthemums, which were below in the drawing-room; sweet-smelling orange blossoms which have been brought from Leo's garden in Provence; then primroses, and we cut also and throw over the clothes the leaves of a cyca to which we attached a special value, because, con-

trary to the custom of annual cypresses, it had remained living for four summers in succession in the shade in our courtyard.

The face continues to grow refined, to become more beautiful in its pallor of white wax. Never was there a dead face more beautiful to look on, and we thought that all the little children in the family, even my son Samuel, might enter in the morning to bid her adieu.

Before descending to my mother, and in order to gain time and to delay still longer the moment for saying everything to her, we make up our minds to place the whole room in perfect order. Thus, when she comes to see her sister once again the aspect of everything around will have nothing in it that is painful, and will be more in harmony with the infinite calmness of the face which rests on the white pillow. This, like everything else, we do entirely ourselves, and in this way no trace will remain of the struggle of the night to those who were not present at it. Always maintaining the



same silence, stepping on tip-toe, we began the work with a craving for activity which is perhaps a little feverish. Here we are, like servants, taking away plates, cups, medicines, all the apparatus of illness and death. Then we open the windows to the frozen air of night; we burn incense, and I even remember that I myself swept the carpets, feeling a pleasure at this moment in doing for her even the most humble work. Five o'clock in the morning strikes when all is finished. When everything is in perfect order and the flowers are arranged, a little silver lamp placed in a certain position throws through the shutter a rosy light on the dead face, which completes its radiant transfiguration. Aunt Claire has become pretty, prettier than we have ever seen her in her life; an expression of supreme triumph and peace has fixed itself for ever upon her as in marble. Her face at this moment is rather an ideal representation of hers, in which, while all the features have been made regular, are preserved only the



charm, gentleness, and sweetness reflected from her soul, and these green branches placed in the shape of a cross on her breast add to the tranquil and unexpected majesty of her look.

Come now, there is no longer any pretext for further delay. We must make up our minds to tell my mother that all is passed and what we have done. To reach her room I had to make a long detour by the *rez-de-chaussée* because of my son, who sleeps the light sleep of a little child, and I find our silent journey interminable as I pass with a lamp in my hand at this unaccustomed hour through the rooms and stairs one after the other—black and cold.

It is horribly painful to be the bearer of such a message. At the first knock, though it is a gentle one, and before Mélanie had had time to get up and open, the voice of mamma, who defines why we have come, asks, in this silence of the night, very

quickly and with an intonation full of anguish, "It is all over, is it not?"

The winter's day breaks at last, very pale, much less cold than the preceding days, warmed by that melted snow which had fallen through the night.

In the forenoon the servants go hither and thither to announce the end to our friends. They bring bouquets and wreaths of the sad flowers of winter, with which the bed is gradually covered. They were still awaiting the roses from Provence which had been ordered by telegram. The photographer comes to take that quiet face framed in white locks, which to-morrow will have disappeared for ever. The image which will be made will remain permanent for some years still—for just a few moments of insignificant duration in the continuous infinitude of time. Friends go up and go down; the house is full of continual rustling, unique, soft, with muffled feet, and there lies Aunt Claire in the midst of her

flowers, with the same smile always of triumphant and unalterable peace. My little niece, only five, when she is brought to the bed-side, thus expresses her impressions to her still smaller sister, who has not yet been brought up: "They have just taken me to see Aunt Claire, who looks like an angel as she is ascending to heaven."

I also remember the scene with Leo. For nearly four years he was her neighbor at table. They had their little secrets—even their comic little quarrels, especially in reference to a certain pair of thin short scissors for embroidery which are called "monstres"; he, inventing a thousand excuses, each more stupid than the other, for wanting these little "monstres," would come to ask the loan of them from Aunt Claire, and she would refuse them always in indignation. Only one solitary time she had confided them to him—the evening on which he had been promoted to his captaincy. On this day she had herself quietly slipped them under his napkin in

fulfillment of an old promise. "The day on which you get your captaincy I will lend them to you, if you are only good up to then." And this morning, somebody having mentioned before him the words, "little monstres," he bursts into sobs.

. . . . .

I go to the cemetery under the mid-day sun to make the arrangements with regard to the vault and the ceremony on the following day. The weather is pleasant after these terrible frosts, and there is a deceptive sky which mocks one with the light of summer. I believe that somber skies are less melancholy in December than those half-lights which grow warm toward the middle of the day, and afterward grow cold very early from the dampness and the fogs. In this cemetery, bright and almost smiling under the sun, where thousands of artificial wreaths throw prismatic colors on the tombs, I allow myself to be distracted for a few moments, my mind going a-wandering, when suddenly

there comes back upon me the recollection of death, and I remember that I have gone there to prepare a place of annihilation for my Aunt Claire.

The night is quickly returned, and we prepare for the last vigil. I look for a long time before I depart at the serene face of Aunt Claire, trying to fix in my memory this last image of her, so silent and so pretty. All the arrangements, these flowers on the bed, everything is just as I would have wished it, and just as I had seen it with a sad spirit of anticipation.

Memories of childhood return to me this evening with a curious distinctness. They return to me doubtless to give their farewell, for it is certain that Aunt Claire takes away a great part of them into the earth. When I was eight or ten years of age I had a bird which I loved very much. I knew that its little existence was very uncertain, and I had taken the singular precaution of preparing a long time beforehand all that

was necessary to bury it—a little leaden box lined with rose-colored wadding, and a cambric handkerchief belonging to Aunt Claire as a pall. I loved this little bird with a strange affection, and with the vehemence of many of my feelings then. For a long time in advance, I represented to myself that a day would come when I would have to put the bird in its little box, and when I would see the silent cage occupied by the little coffin covered with its white pall. One morning when they came to take me to college, Aunt Claire, who had watched me from a window, took me apart to announce to me gently that the bird had been found dead, from what cause was unknown. I wept for it and buried it, as I had for a long time arranged. Then, till the day following I left in its cage the miniature coffin covered with the fine handkerchief, and I could not grow tired of looking at the sad sight, which, however, *was the realization of a thing that had been long feared and*

*imagined beforehand exactly as it occurred.*

It was something like this on this particular evening. During all the recent winters, seeing Aunt Claire grow weaker and older, I had had a vision of her bed of death, of her last toilet and her white locks thus arranged, and with many flowers thrown over her. This evening I look at the realization of a thing which I had feared and foreseen absolutely as it was to be, with the certainty that it had reached its inexorable fulfillment.

FRIDAY, December 5.—The heavy frost has returned under a sky low, dark, funereal. Never since I came into the world has there been such a winter in our country. Once more there comes these vague impressions of the end of everything, of universal destruction before the invading ice ; and more and more the mind in such times is brought back again and again and concentrated on the dominating



thought of the moment—which for us all is the thought of death.

I dreaded to think what the face of Aunt Claire might look like in the daylight of this day. One night more could change it very much, and we had resolved to cover the face if it had ceased to be pleasant to look at.

After some hours of sleep I come anxiously to look at it; but no, there is no effacement in the pale features; rather the appearance has become younger, more beautiful, more refined, and the expression of peace and of triumph, the mysterious sweet smile, remains always exactly the same, as though decisive and eternal. We should have wished to preserve her and look at her for one day more, if everything had not been arranged for to-day.

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There are a thousand preparations to be made which keep one from thinking. The baskets of roses and lilies from Provence have just arrived from the railway station,



and there is a sense almost of enchantment in opening them. The bed from which Aunt Claire smiles so sweetly is soon covered with all these new flowers.

Now they bring in that ugly, commonplace and sinister thing—the coffin—which I had never before seen enter the house, having always been absent on the sea whenever death visited us; and the hour has come to do the most cruel of all our tasks, to place Aunt Claire in this coffin, and to close the cover upon her forever.

Before this is done mamma goes away, for we had begged her to leave the room in order that she may not see this last sight.

Ah! the sorrow of very old people, men or women, who have no tears any longer to shed! This is the hardest of all things for me to look at, except, perhaps, the tears of little children who are deserted. And at this moment I have to look on the sorrow of my own mother, and the sorrow that belongs to her alone. I believe that nothing has ever grieved me like her farewell kiss

to her sister, and the expression of her eyes when she turned back on the threshold to look once more, and for the last time, on this companion of all her life. Never has my revolt been more angry and more deadly against all the odiousness of death.

We placed her in the coffin ourselves, not allowing her to be touched by any strange hand, even by those faithful servants who were almost ourselves. It was all done very quickly, almost mechanically.

There were many people there, porters, workmen who had come to solder the heavy lead, and their presence neutralizes everything. It is all over, the face of Aunt Claire is vanished forever, vanished into the great night of things that are gone.

The coffin goes away; it is brought down into the courtyard; it has departed forever from this dear room, in which during all my childhood I came to receive those pettings from her who never tired of giving them, and into which it seemed as though her presence had brought something

of the charm of the old isle, something of that former life of our ancestors *là-bas*.

In the courtyard, on benches covered with grass, they place her under the shelter of an awning. On the ground leaves are strewn, and around were green arbutus trees. I have everything taken away that the severe month of December has destroyed in our fruit trees; have the frozen branches cut, and all the dead leaves taken off. On this last occasion of her being in the courtyard, which she had cared for all her life, in which each plant, and even each imperceptible bit of moss ought to have known her, I am anxious that everything should make its toilet for her, in spite of the winter.

Of the ceremony of the procession, on which there falls a shower of melted snow, I scarcely remember anything. In public one becomes almost unconscious, as at the burial of somebody one does not know. One remembers only, from amid so many external manifestations of sympathy, a look,

a shake of the hands, which have been really meant.

Ah! but the returning! To see the house once more under this black December sky, in this icy rain, in this funereal twilight; the house in disorder, trodden by the feet of so many people, with the green branches which were strewn around, the odor of all the accessories to death, which hangs vaguely on the stairs over which the coffin has passed. Then comes the evening meal, the first meal at which we all meet, now tranquil, without any call to get up or go into the chamber of the invalid; the first meal which begins again the old life of yesterday—with one place forever empty in the midst of us. And then the first night which follows this day.

Lying in the Arab chamber, I am constantly beset, athwart my tired, half-sleep, by an impression, infinitely sad, of the unaccustomed stillness which is on the other side of the wall, and which will last forever—the stillness in the room of Aunt

Claire. Ah! for those dear voices and those dear protecting murmurs which I heard there for so many years through this wall when the stillness of night had come upon the house—Aunt Claire opening the large wardrobe, which creaked on its locks in a peculiar manner (the wardrobe in which was placed for ever "*L'Ours aux pralines*"); Aunt Claire calling out some words, which I could just distinguish, to mamma, who had gone to bed, a little further on in a room close by, "Do you sleep, my sister?" And the large clock on the wall—stopped to-day—which chimed so loud; the clock which made so much noise when being wound up, and which sometimes, to our great amusement, would wind itself up before it went to sleep, at the stroke of midnight—so that it had become a traditional joke in the house whenever there was any nocturnal disturbance to accuse Aunt Claire and her clock of it.

All that is over, forever over; for Aunt Claire has taken her departure for the

cemetery, and mamma, doubtless, will prefer never again to live in the room next hers; silence, therefore, is to reign there forever. For many years it was my joy and my comfort to hear them both, to recognize their dear old voices through this wall, rendered sonorous by the night. It is all over; never again shall I hear them.

. . . . .

When at last, under the influence of the extreme fatigue and the overwork of these last few days, I fell asleep on this night of mourning, I had a succession of dreams which I will attempt to describe and which were all impregnated with the idea of death.

The first dream took place at home. We were all gathered together in the Gothic hall, and in the evening. It must have been just about the hour the sun was setting, for large red rays reached us from the west through the curtains and the embrasures of the arches, and yet there was a light that was dimmer and more somber than is usual,

even when the twilight is coming on. In the hall there was all the desolation of ruin. The walls were cracked, the chairs were broken, the furniture was worm-eaten, everything was crumbling to dust. But we were careless of this disorder, 'twas but the precursor of some other kind of indefinable destruction which had become inevitable; we remained stationary in our places, resignedly awaiting the end of the world.

And now we began to see through the half-opened wall the heaped-up ruins of the houses of the whole neighborhood, and beyond stretched the monotonous horizon of the country as far as Martrou and Limoise: while over the vast plains the red disk of the setting sun lay, scattering around us its long evening rays. The forms and faces of the beings who waited there with me remained indistinct, with phantom-like aspect; on one side was my mother, whom I recognized. But who were the others? Perhaps ancestors whom I had never seen,



from the Isle of Oléron, or some descendants or heirs who had not yet come into existence—members of the same family, but without epoch or distinct individuality. We were all still under the impression of the death of Aunt Claire, but this impression lost something of its force under the feeling that we were face to face with the end of everything and of ourselves; the regret of what we had lost in her was diffused in the more general melancholy inspired by the annihilation of everything else in the world. And as to this sun, which set with a tranquillity that seemed to vaunt of its limitless duration, we looked upon it with a sort of hatred. Then one of the half-phantoms stretched forth its hand, and its index-finger pointed toward the disk of the sun as though to curse it; a voice began to utter words which seemed to us to reveal truths that could not be grasped, while, at the same time, they were the expression of our universal complaint—of our universal revolt, hitherto voiceless,



against that annihilation which was so near and so inevitable.

The words which the voice uttered, when recalled after, in waking hours, appeared to be incoherent and devoid of sense; in the hours of dreams they appeared on the contrary an eloquent and profound Apocalypse, revealing sublime truths. In dreams one is perhaps more capable of understanding the mysterious, more capable of penetrating into the unfathomed depths of origins and causes.

Of all the sentences which the voice had uttered against the sun, this last one alone remains with definite meaning to my awakened spirit—a phrase not commonplace, and ordinary enough in all conscience: “Thou art always the same—always the same. The same that didst set in the same place, on these same plains, years, centuries, ten of centuries ago, in the period before the great deluge, when thy sole duty was to cast light on an earth populated by the animals of that period—the

mammoths and the plesiosaurus." And this word plesiosaurus, on which the voice died away, had vibrated strangely, had been prolonged in the silence as though it were an invocation and an appeal to the monstrosities and the terrors of the beginnings of existence. The dimly lit plain, with the loud expiring and melancholy echo of this word, stretched to infinite length before us, with this same pallid sun ever in the midst of its immense horizon. The plain put on again its antediluvian aspect, the primordial desolation and nudity of the epochs that have disappeared.

And thus it came to pass that inexplicable things began to take place around us at the bottom of the hall. In the dark part, the door of the "museum" opened—in which formerly my childish spirit had been initiated into the infinite diversity of Nature's forms—opened on the high gallery on which it gave; animals began to walk forth from it; the old animals stuffed with straw, some of which, brought thither by

sailors of a past age, had been dried up into dust for a long time.

Slowly, one after the other, the beasts came forth; there was, however, neither epoch, nor duration, nor life, nor death, and in this grand confusion of things there seemed no cause for wonder.

The birds, coming forth from behind their glass cases, went one by one and perched on the embrasures of the high chimney-place; and I especially recognized among them the oldest ones, the first that had been given to me *when I was a child*. It is a curious thing that at moments of fatigue or sorrow, of any kind of over-excitement of the nervous system, it is always the impressions of childhood which reappear and dominate everything.

The butterflies also, butterflies dead for so many summers, had broken from the pins and the glass cases, and flew around us in the darkness, that grew deeper with every succeeding moment. There was one in particular among these butterflies

whose approach I saw with a feeling of indefinable terror; a certain yellow, pale butterfly, the "citron-aurore," which is associated to me, in my mind, with a whole world of memories of sunshine and youth. It began its little life again like the rest; but its wings shivered with that same agony which I had seen in the butterfly I had found, four days previously, pinned to the curtains of my barrack-room bed, and I retreated from it, so as not to interfere with its flight, surprised that the other human forms did not do likewise; for this butterfly had become in my eyes an emanation, as it were, of Aunt Claire, something of herself—perhaps her wandering soul.

. . . . .

Next day another dream came to me, suffused with this same feeling of the end of all things, but with less of the sense of revolt and horror.

I dreamed this time that after a long sea voyage I returned to the familiar hearth,

having aged much in the meantime, and my hair having grown gray. Athwart this same halflay of the twilight I saw once again the things that were familiar to me. They were in no way disarranged, but in orderly array as in the houses of the living; in spite of this apprehension of death, which continued to hang over everything.

I arrived alone, expected by nobody, after an absence that had lasted so long. I saw my mother slowly ascending the dark stairs, aged and feeble to an extent I had never seen before; we recognized each other without saying anything, united in the same silent apprehensions. Taking her by the hand I brought her into my own room—the Arab room—where I made her sit down, and threw myself on the ground at her feet. Then, drawn to the door by some indefinable and disquieting presentiment, I went to look out on the staircase; I went out with a certain tremulous hesitation in this sinister semi-dark-

ness, to try and see if there were nobody ascending the stairs after us. The room of Aunt Claire, which also looked out on this vestibule, was open, and lit by a sort of yellow as by the yellowish rays of a setting star. I went in there to look around. And then, turning around, I saw her behind me; she had reappeared silently with her set eyes smiling, but so sad. I felt no terror; I touched her just to assure myself that she was as real as I myself; then, taking her by the hand, and still without uttering a word, I led her into the Arab room toward mamma, to whom I said only as I entered, "Guess whom I am bringing back to you." When they were both seated, and I once more at their feet, I took them once again by the hands, just to hold them tight and prevent them from vanishing before me, having but little confidence in their reality or their duration. And we remained a long time thus, without motion and without words, with the consciousness not only

of being alone in this deserted house, but of being also the only survivors in all this town abandoned to specters, as though after the long lapse of time we three alone had been spared. Moreover, we knew that we also were going to disappear, to be annihilated. I said to myself with a supreme despair, I have been able to fix something of their features in my books, to reveal them both to thousands of unknown brothers as distraught as I by the prospect of death and oblivion. But they also have passed away, everybody who had read me, every one of my own generation; and now it is all over with that factitious life which I gave them both in the memories of men; it is all over with them, it is all over with me; even the traces of our existence are about to be effaced and lost in the absoluteness of annihilation, complete nothingness.

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MARCH, 1891.—Three months have already passed since Aunt Claire left us.



Almost on the morrow of her death I had abruptly rushed off, leaving the house still in the sinister disorder and the country under the somber cold of the severe mid-winter. I had gone to lands of sun and blue sea, called to a distance by my trade of sailor.

And I came back yesterday on a vacation of a few hours in weather that had already become spring-like, very luminous, very soft. I was almost saddened by the perfect restoration of order everywhere, by the careless tranquillity of things. Time has passed, and the image of Aunt Claire has faded in the distance.

A warm sun, transient and unexpected, has begun once again to brighten our courtyard, which I had left still in the grip of that black cold, with the green branches that had formed part of the funeral pyre still heaped up together in a corner under the snow. Several of our plants are dead—some of those which Aunt Claire had tended herself, and which I loved because



of her ; they have been replaced by others which had been brought thither in haste and in expectation of my arrival. Even in this courtyard, which had been her domain, the trace of her beneficent and sweet stay on earth will soon have disappeared.

We all go together to the cemetery to pay a visit to the vault where she sleeps, now walled in with stones. A spring sun shines on our black clothes. The cemetery itself is shaking off the long torpor of this long and fatal winter. The plants, whose roots touch the dead, already are gently putting forth their buds, and are going to live again.

We feel as though we came to see a tomb which had become already old and begun to be forgotten.

On our return I go into her room ; the windows are opened to the soft breeze of spring, and there reigns in it a perfect order : perfect order prevails, and with it there

would seem to be almost an air of gayety, an unexpected return, as it were, to younger days. In her place there is substituted a large portrait, just recently painted, which has caught slightly her expression and her sweet smile, but that image framed in this gold that looks too new now, but will by and by fade, will not tell my son Samuel whom it represents unless he is told all about her. It will become, after I have gone, just the same as those other portraits of ancestors, a mere commonplace thing, which nobody knows and at which one scarcely looks.

I open her large wardrobe. There are the little things which she used to handle every day, which have been arranged with religious care by my mother, who has put them in an order that is not to be interfered with; behind some little boxes, of a make that has gone out of fashion, to which Aunt Claire was much attached, I suddenly come upon the *Ours aux Pralines* in a corner. All these things will remain im-

movable on these shelves that are not to be moved again in this room—which nobody will occupy again—until that hour of all profanation which I cannot foresee, which will come later when I also am dead.

. . . . .

I return to my own quarters—to my study, and, with my elbow on the sill of the open window and with an Oriental cigarette between my lips, I look, as I have for so many years, at the little familiar street, at the district which does not change.

At all times I have dreamed and meditated much at this same window—especially in the evenings of June; and I would wish that they should not change, until my death, the aspect of the old roofs of the neighborhood. I feel attached to them. although perhaps they would appear commonplace and ordinary to those to whom they bring no memories. And every time that I have stayed in my own home during

all the different phases of my life which have succeeded each other with such rapidity, I have passed moments of reverie there, moments of nostalgia and of regret for the thousand and one scenes in the East or elsewhere. And, conversely, when elsewhere I have in the midst of these mirages longed now and then for this window. Little Samuel, my son, has begun to come there also, supported on the neck of his nurse; more than once he has cast his little eye, surprised and half-conscious, on the neighborhood. After me, perhaps, he will also love this place in his turn.

The weather is deliciously fine to-day. The sky is blue, the breeze passes over my head, warm as a breeze in April. Everywhere there is a feeling of spring. Already may be heard the pipes of the goat-herds who have just arrived from the Pyrenees. There, too, are those three wandering musicians, who every summer reappear and play once more the same airs. There they are, installed at their old post on the pave-

ment in front, to begin all over again the music of the beautiful seasons that have now for ever passed away. For the moment I allow myself to be carried away just a little by all this gayety, and by the thought of all the sunny morrows which are still ahead of me and of that life which still lies before me.

My eyes now wander to the window which is nearest mine, one of those in the apartments of Aunt Claire. It is half-closed, and I see through the opening the small and perfumed head of a vigorous bud of mignonette push its way through the tiles of the window sill. (Mignonette was the favorite flower of Aunt Claire. I used to see it in her room almost every season, and mamma doubtless will preserve her traditions faithfully in this as if she were still there.)

For the last two or three summers she used to sit often behind her shutters, half open, having given up a little—from sheer weakness—all those tasks which had occu-

pied her for more than half a century. We used to see her there quite close to us, she bade us "good-day," with a smile above her eternal mignonette flowers, at the moment in which Leo and I left our tasks, he his mathematical books, I the sheets of paper on which I was striving to fix the transient things which time carries away. Both of us would lean out of the window, amusing ourselves by looking down on the passers-by, on the contemplative cats on the roofs, and the martins whirling in the air.

I confess that I am attached to my passers-by also, and the longer they are in our neighborhood the deeper is my attachment. I love not only those who now and again lift their heads to give me the salute of acquaintance, but also those who cast upon me an ill-natured and foolish look, nourishing some little secret grudge against me. Though they do not know it, these latter form a part of the surroundings of

my home, and, if needs were, I should offer a bribe to Death to leave them a little longer near me.

Now I look to where Aunt Claire had her rooms, and I find that breeze melancholy which charmed me just a while ago. I find suddenly the sun mournful and sad, and this motionless serenity of the air fills me with anguish. These half-opened shutters from which I shall never, never again see her cap of black lace and her white locks of hair; this bud of mignonette which is there all alone, showing me innocently its pretty head—no, I cannot any longer look at these things, and I close my window quickly that I may weep like a little child.

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Perhaps, *mon Dieu*, it is the last time the sorrow for Aunt Claire will come to me with this intensity and in the special form that brings tears. For everything in this world grows less acute; everything

becomes customary and is forgotten. For a veil of mist, ashes, I know not what, is thrown as though in haste and suddenly across our memory of beings that have returned into eternal nothingness.



THE SLAUGHTER OF AN OX  
AT SEA.



## THE SLAUGHTER OF AN OX AT SEA.

WE were in the midst of the Indian Ocean on a sad evening in which the wind is beginning to groan. Two poor oxen remained to us of the twelve that we had taken in at Singapore to eat on the way. These had been spared because the voyage was being prolonged owing to the contrary winds of the monsoon.

Two poor oxen, wasted, thin, pitiable, their hides already shabby and worn through by the bones shaken by the rocking of the vessel. For many days they had sailed over this miserable sea—their backs turned to their old pasture lands far away, where nobody would ever take them again; fastened tightly to each other by a rope round their horns, and their heads lowered

with resignation each time that a wave came to inundate their bodies with a new chilling bath. With mournful eyes they chewed together some bad hay, wet with the salt of the sea; animals condemned to death, doomed from the beginning and without hope of mercy, but destined to suffer still for a long time before death; to suffer from the cold, the shock of the vessel, from the constant wetting, from the numbness, and from fear.

The evening of which I speak was especially somber. At sea there are many such evenings, when ugly and livid fogs spread themselves over the horizon, as the light is fading, when the wind begins to swell its voice, and the night announces beforehand that it is going to be unsafe. At such hours, feeling one's self isolated in the midst of these infinite waters, one is seized with a vague anguish which the twilight never brings on land, even in the most funereal places. And these two poor oxen, children of the meadow and the

pasture, alone, more completely exiles than we men, in these moving deserts, and unbuoyed by hope as we are, must, in spite of their rudimentary intelligence, suffer after their fashion from the depression of such scenes; although they see only confusedly the image of their approaching death.

Yet with the slowness of the invalided, their large and dim eyes remained fixed on these sinister distances in the sea. One by one their companions had been slaughtered on these planks beside them. For two weeks, then, they had lived together, drawn toward each other by the solitude, supporting each other in the rocking of the vessel, and in their friendship rubbing their horns together. And now the person who is charged with the supply of provisions, him whom on board vessels we call the *maitre-commis*, came toward me on the bridge to tell me, in the usual phrase, "Captain, a cow is going to be killed." The devil take him, say I, this *maitre-*

*commis!* I receive him very badly, although assuredly he was not to blame; but in truth I had had no luck from the beginning of this voyage; it was always during my watch that the time came for the slaughter of the oxen. Besides it takes place immediately below the bridge on which we walk, and it is useless to turn away one's eyes, to think of other things, to look abroad on the waters; you cannot avoid hearing the stroke of the ax between the horns, and in the center of the poor forehead, bound very low to a ring on the deck. And then comes the noise of the animal as he falls down on the deck, with a rattling of his bones. Soon after he is quickly cut to pieces. A horrible and musty smell comes from his entrails when they are opened, and, all around, the deck of the vessel, ordinarily so clean, is soiled by blood and unclean things.

And now it was the moment to slaughter the ox. Some sailors formed a circle around the ring by which it was to be tied for ex-

ecution ; and of the two that remain they take the more infirm, one who was already dying, and who allowed itself to be carried away without resistance.

Then the other turned slowly its head to follow it with melancholy eyes, and seeing that they brought it toward the same fatal spot where all its brothers had fallen, *it understood*. A ray of light could be seen in the poor depressed forehead of this chewing animal, and it uttered a low sound of distress. The cry of that ox was one of the saddest sounds that ever made me groan, and at the same time was one of the most mysterious things that I had ever heard. There was in it a dim reproach against all men, and then a kind of resignation that was deeply moving, something so restrained and subdued, as though it felt how useless was its groan of despair, and that its cry would be heard by nobody. With the consciousness of its universal abandonment, it appeared to say, "Ah, yes, the inevitable hour has come for him who was my last

brother, who came with me from *là-bas*, from the country where we ran on the grass—and my turn will come soon, and not another being in the world will have pity on me any more than on him.”

Ah! yes, I did have pity on him; I experienced a sense of pity, indeed, that was almost quixotic, and an impulse came upon me to go and take hold of his head and, feeble and revolting though it was, to support it on my breast, since that is one of the physical methods most natural to us when we wish to soothe with the sense of protection those who suffer or are about to die.

But, in fact, it did not receive any help from anybody, for even I, who had felt the supreme distress of its cry, remained stiff and impassive in my place, merely turning away my eyes. Because an animal is in despair one cannot change the direction of a ship and prevent three hundred men from eating their rations of fresh meat. A man who should even think of



such a thing for a minute would pass for a lunatic.

Nevertheless a little cabin-boy, who perhaps also was alone in the world and had never found any pity, had heard the appeal and so understood it in the depths of his soul as I had. He approached the ox quite gently, and softly and gently began to rub its nose. If he had only thought he might have been able to predict to him thus: "All these will die also—these who are going to eat you to-morrow; all, even the strongest and the youngest, and perhaps the terrible hour will be still more cruel for them than for you, with suffering more prolonged. Perhaps then they would prefer the stroke of the ax right in the midst of their foreheads." The animal returned to him his caress, looking at him with affectionate eyes, and licking his hands. But it was all over. The ray of light which had penetrated his low and narrow forehead went out in the sinister immensity in which the ship carried him,

always faster, in the cold fog, in the twilight announcing the bad night ; by the body of his companion, who was now nothing but a shapeless mass of meat hung on hooks, he began once more to chew quietly—did this poor ox. His brief intelligence did not go further ; he thought of nothing ; he no longer remembered anything.

THE IDYL OF AN OLD  
COUPLE.



## THE IDYL OF AN OLD COUPLE.

TOTO-SAN and Kaka-San were husband and wife. They were old—so old; everybody had always known them; the oldest people in Nagasaki did not even remember the time when they had seen them young. They begged in the streets. Toto-San, who was blind, dragged after him in a sort of small bath-chair Kaka-San, who was paralyzed. Formerly they were known as Hato-San and Oumé-San (Monsieur Pigeon and Madame Prune), but the people no longer remembered this. In the Japanese language Toto and Kata are very soft words which signify “father” and “mother” in the mouths of children. Doubtless because of their great age, everybody called them so; and in this land of excessive politeness

they added to these familiar names the word "San," which is a word of courtesy like monsieur and madame (*Monsieur Papa and Madame Maman*). Even the smallest of Japanese babies do not neglect these terms of politeness. Their method of begging was discreet and *comme il faut*. They did not harass the passers-by with prayers, but held out their hands simply and without saying anything—poor hands wrinkled and already like those of a mummy. The people gave them rice, heads of fish, old soups. Very small, like all Japanese women, Kaka-San appeared reduced almost to nothing in this chair, in which her lower limbs, almost dead, had been dried up and huddled together for so many years. Her carriage was badly hung; and thus it came to be much jolted in the course of its journeys through the city. He did not walk very quickly, her poor husband, and he was so full of care and precaution. She guided him with her voice, and he, attentive, his ear pricked up, went on his way, like the

wandering Jew, in his everlasting darkness, the leather rein thrown over his shoulder and striking the ground with a bamboo cane to direct his steps.

They went to all the religious festivals celebrated in the temples. Under the great black cedars, which shade the sacred meadows, at the foot of some old monster in granite, they installed themselves at an early hour before the arrival of the earliest devotees, and so long as the pilgrimage lasted, many of the passers-by stopped at their side. They were young girls with the faces of dolls, and little eyes like cats, dragging after them their high boots of wood; Japanese children, very funny in their long parti-colored dresses, arriving in bands to pay their devotions and holding each other by their hands; beautiful simpering ladies, with complicated chignons going to the pagoda to pray and to laugh; peasants with long hair, Bonzes or merchants, every imaginable description of these gay little doll-people passed before Kaka-

San, who still was able to see them, and Toto-San, who was not. They always gave them a kind look, and sometimes somebody would detach himself from a group to give them some alms. Sometimes even they made them bows, quite as if they were people of quality—so well were they known, and so polite is everybody in this Empire.

In those days it often happened that they could smile at the feast when the weather was fine and the breeze soft, when the sorrows of old age slumbered a little in their exhausted limbs. Kaka-San, excited by the tumult of the laughing and light voices, began to simper like the passing ladies, playing with her poor fan of paper, assuming the air of one who still had something to say to life, and who interested herself like other people in the amusing things of this world.

But when evening came, bringing darkness and chill under the cedars, when there was everywhere a sense of religious horror and mystery around the temples, in



the alleys lined with monsters, the old couple sank back on themselves. It seemed as if the fatigues of the day had gnawed them from within; their wrinkles became deeper, their skin hung more loosely; their faces expressed only their frightful misery and the hideous idea of the nearness of death.

Meantime, thousands of lamps were lit around them in the black branches; and the devout held their places on the steps of the temples. The hum of a gayety, at once frivolous and strange, came from this crowd, filled the avenues and the holy vaults, in sharp contrast with the sinister grin of the immobile monsters who guard the gods—with the frightful and unknown symbols—with the vague terrors of the night. The feast was prolonged till daylight, and seemed an immense irony to the spirits of heaven rather than an act of adoration; but an irony that had no bitterness, that was child-like, amiable, and, above all things, irresistibly joyous.

But this affected not the old couple. With the setting of the sun there was nothing which could animate any longer those human wrecks. They became sinister to look at; huddled up, apart from everybody else, like sick pariahs or old monkeys, worn out and done for, eating in a corner their poor little alms-offerings. At this moment were they disturbed by something profound and eternal, else why was there this expression of anguish on their death-masks? Who knows what passed in their old Japanese heads? Perhaps nothing at all. They struggled simply to keep on living; they ate with their little chop-sticks, helping each other tenderly. They covered each other up so as not to get cold and to keep the dew from penetrating to their bones. They took care of each other as much as they could with the simple desire of being alive the next day, and of recommencing their old wandering promenade, the one rolling the other's chair. In the little chair Kaka-San

kept all their household effects, broken dishes of blue porcelain for their rice, little cups to drink their tea, and lanterns of red paper which they lit at night.

Once every week, Kaka-San's hair was carefully combed and dressed by her beloved husband. Her arms she could not quite raise high enough to fix her Japanese chignon, and Toto-San had learned to do it instead. Trembling and fumbling, he caressed the poor old head, which allowed itself to be stroked with coquettish abandon, and the whole thing recalled—except that it was sadder—the toilette which the humbugs help each other to make. Her hair was thin; and Toto-San did not find much to comb on her poor yellow parchment, wrinkled like the skin of an apple in winter. He succeeded, however, in fixing up her hair in puffs, after the Japanese fashion: and she, deeply interested in the operation, followed it with her eyes in a broken piece of a mirror, with: "A little higher, Toto-

San !” “ A little more to the right !” “ A little to the left.” In the end, when he had stuck two long pins in, which gave to the *coiffure* its finishing touch, Kaka-San seemed to regain the air of a genteel grandmother, a profile like that of a well-bred woman.

They also went through their ablutions conscientiously: for they are very clean in Japan.

And when they had finished these ablutions once more, which had been done so often already during so many years ; when they had completed that toilette, which the approach of death rendered less grateful from day to day—did they feel themselves vivified by the pure and cold water ? did they experience a little more comfort in the freshness of the morning ?

Ah ! what a depth of wretchedness was theirs ! After each night, to wake up both more infirm, more depressed, more shaky, and in spite of it all, to wish obstinately to live on, to display their decrepi-

tude to the sun, and to set out in the same eternal promenade in their bath-chair; with the same long pauses, the same creaks of the wood, the same joltings, the same fatigue; to pass even through the streets, into the suburbs, through the valleys, even to the distant country where a festival was announced in some temple in the woods.

It was in the fields one morning, at the crossing of two of the Royal roads, that death suddenly caught old Kaka-San. It was a beautiful morning in April; the sun was shining brightly, and the grass was very green. In the island of Kiu-Siu the spring is a little warmer than ours, comes earlier, and already everything was resplendent in the fertile fields. The two roads crossed each other in the midst of the fields; all around was the rice-crop glistening under the light breeze in innumerable changes of color. The air was filled with the music of the grasshoppers, which in Japan are loud in their buzz. At this spot there were about ten tombs in the

grass, under a bunch of large and isolated cedars. Square stone pillars, or ancient Budhas, in granite, were set up in the cups of the lotus. Beyond the fields of rice, you saw the woods, not unlike our wood of oak. But here and there were white or rose-colored clumps, which were the camelias in flower, and the light foliage of the bamboos. Then farther off were the mountains, resembling small domes with little cupolas, forming against the sky shapes that seemed artificial, yet very agreeable.

It was in the midst of this region of calm and verdure that the chair of Kaka-San stopped, and for a halt that was to be its last. Peasants, men and women, dressed in their long dresses of dark blue cotton with pagoda sleeves—about twenty good little Japanese souls—hurried to the bath-chair where the old dying woman was convulsively twisting her old arms. She had had a stroke quite suddenly while being drawn along by Toto-San on a

pilgrimage to the temple of the goddess Kwanon.

They, good souls, did their best, attracted by sympathy as much as by curiosity, to help the old woman. They were for the most part people who, like her, were making their way to the feast of Kwanon, the Goddess of Beauty. Poor Kaka-San! They attempted to restore her with a cordial made of rice brandy; they rubbed the pit of her stomach with aromatic herbs, and bathed the back of her neck with the fresh water of a stream. Toto-San touched her quite gently, caressed her timidly, not knowing what to do, embarrassing the others with his awkward blind movements, and trembling with anguish in all his limbs.

Finally, they made her swallow, in small pellets, pieces of paper which contained efficacious prayers written on them by the Bonzes, and which a helpful woman had consented to take from the lining in her own sleeves. Labor in vain! for the



hour had struck. Death was there, invisible, laughing in the face of all these good Japanese, and holding the old woman tight in his secure hands.

A last painful convulsion and Kaka-San was dead. Her mouth lay open, her body all on one side, half fallen out of the chair, and her arms hanging like the doll of a poor Punch and Judy show, which is allowed to rest at the close of the performance.

This little shaded cemetery, before which the final scene had taken place, seemed to be indicated by the Spirits themselves, and even to have been chosen by the dead woman herself. They made no delay. They hired some coolies who were passing, and very quickly they began to dig out the earth. Everybody was in a hurry, not wishing to miss the pilgrimage nor to leave this poor old thing without burial—the more so as the day promised to be very hot, and already some ugly flies were gathering round. In half an hour the grave was



ready. They took the old woman from her chair, lifting her by the shoulders, and placed her in the earth, seated as she had always been, her lower limbs huddled together as they had been in life—like one of those dried-up monkeys which sportsmen meet sometimes at the foot of trees in the forest. Toto-San tried to do everything himself, no longer in his right senses, and hindering the coolies, who have not sensitive hearts, and who hustled him about. He groaned like a little child, and tears ran from his eyes without exciting any attention. He tried to find out if at least her hair was properly combed to present herself in the eternal dwellings, if the bows of her hair were in order, and he wished to replace the large pins in her head-dress before they threw the earth over her.

. . . . .

They heard a slight groaning in the foliage; it was the spirits of Kaka-San's ancestors who had come to receive her on her entrance into the Country of Shadows.

Toto-San yoked himself to the bath-chair once more ; once more started out, from the sheer habit of walking and of dragging something after him. But the bath-chair was empty behind him. Separated from her who had been his friend, adviser, his intelligence and his eyes, he went about without thought, a mournful wreck, irrevocably alone on earth to the very end, no longer capable of collecting his thoughts, moving timidly without object and without hope, in night blacker than ever before. In the meantime the grasshoppers sang at their shrillest in the grass, which darkened under the stars ; and whilst real night gathered around the old blind man, one heard already in the branches the same groanings as earlier while the burial was taking place. They were the murmurs of the Spirits who said : " Console thyself, Toto-San. She rests in a very sweet sort of annihilation where we also are and whither thou com'st soon. She is no longer old nor tottering, for she is dead ; nor ugly to look

upon, since she is hidden in the roots underground; nor disgusting to anybody, since she has become the fertilizing substance of the land. Her body will be purified, permeating the earth; Kaka-San will live again in beautiful Japanese plants; in the branches of the cedar, in the beautiful camelias—in the bamboo."

THE END.

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